

BOHUMIL HRABAL (1914–97)
Papers from a Symposium

Edited by

DAVID SHORT

School of Slavonic and East European Studies
University College London
2004



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Editor's note

The symposium from which the following papers come was the first event to be held under the aegis of the *Centre for the Study of Central Europe* (22nd May, 1997) of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London (now a constituent of University College London). It was felt at the time that Hrabal's death should not go unmarked and the symposium was organised as expeditiously as possible. It was gratifying that, despite the relatively short notice, it attracted speakers from beyond the walls of the host body.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank all the contributors for their comprehensive responses to my promptings during the editing process, and above all to my colleague, Professor Robert B. Pynsent, for his constant advice and encouragement. Since it would otherwise go unrecorded, I wish also to thank the *Czech Centre, London*, for hosting the successful Hrabal evening of talks and readings (and suitable refreshments) which followed on from, and was more social in nature than, the symposium which led — after some unfortunate delays — to the publication of the present volume. The positive side to that delay is that the volume's appearance now happily coincides with the ninetieth anniversary of Bohumil Hrabal's birth in 1914. The School is pleased to acknowledge its gratitude for the grant from the Czech government which has made publication possible.

Windor
August 2001, September 2003

David Short

Notes on Contributors

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Pavel Janáček is a researcher in the history of Czech literature at the Institute for Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences (Prague) with a particular interest in literary trash, on which he has published in *Tvar*, *Česká literatura* and elsewhere. Of particular note is *Svět rodokapsu* (Prague, 1998), an annotated catalogue of a major pre-war series of popular prints. He also contributed to the literary encyclopedias *Český parnas* (Prague, 1993), *Slovník českých spisovatelů od roku 1945*, pt. 2 (Prague, 1998) and *Slovník českých spisovatelů* (Prague, 2000).

Martin Pilař is a lecturer in contemporary Czech literature at the University of Ostrava. He regularly contributes to the literary journal *Host* (Brno) and is the author of *Pokus o žánrové vymezení povídky* (Ostrava, 1994), *Underground — kapitoly o českém literárním undergroundu* (Brno, 1999) and *Mezi cizinou, cizotou a domovem* (Chomutov, 2003). He contributed to the literary encyclopedias *Slovník českého románu 1945–1991* (Ostrava, 1992, 1994²), *Slovník české prózy 1945–1994* (Ostrava, 1994) and *Slovník českých spisovatelů od roku 1945* (Prague, 1995, 1998).

Robert B. Pynsent teaches Czech and Slovak Literature at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Among his books are *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas on Nationality and Personality* (Budapest, London, New York, 1994) and such edited volumes as *The Literature of Nationalism. Essays on East European Identity* (London, 1996) and *A Phoney Peace* (London, 2000).

David Short teaches the Czech and Slovak languages at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He is author of a new version of *Teach Yourself Czech* (London and Chicago, 1993, rev. ed. 2003), *Essays in Czech and Slovak Language and Literature* (London, 1996) and *Customs and Etiquette in the Czech Republic* (Folkestone, 1996); he is preparing an annotated translation of Hrabal's *Klíčky na kapesníku*.

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Introduction

David Short

Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) was a writer who held considerable fascination for his Czech public,¹ based in large measure on the perception of his bohemian way of life in a society, Czechoslovak ‘socialist’ society, which rarely exhibited open tolerance for its rebels and misfits. In the 1950s and early 1960s, he was associated with the Czech counterpart of the Beat Generation, much of the activity of which centred on his apartment on Na hrázi Street in Libeň. This is part of Prague’s inner industrial fringe, surviving old corners of which, not to mention its innumerable pubs, Hrabal personally found bewitching.² What Libeň meant to Hrabal, and to his friend, the artist Vladimír Boudník, is described in colourful detail in ‘Moje Libeň’, one of the nostalgic prose pieces in *Život bez smokingu* (Life without Evening Dress, 1986; illustrated by Boudník), in which he takes stock of his life, work and artistic ideas.³ He later cultivated his off-beat image by holding court regularly at the Golden Tiger pub in Prague, where, merry or morose (as he could often be,⁴ despite the image projected in several works), he would be surrounded by an adoring crowd of writers, would-be writers, musicians, film directors, historians, philosophers, presidents (Clinton, Havel), students — both Czech and foreign — and sundry oddballs. Or he would just sit there in his role of observer from the sidelines, listening and storing up material for later use, as he had done all his life — see the chapter by Pilař. That aspect of Hrabal’s method is also reiterated *passim* in *Kličky na kapesník* (Literally: Loops on a Handkerchief,⁵ 1990).

Perhaps the most notorious of the foreigners who came to kneel at the master’s feet was April Gifford of Stanford, who, in the summer of 1988, attended a language summer school in Prague and duly sought Hrabal out at the Golden Tiger. Her role as the sixth and last woman in his life is described, along with the other five, in ‘Šest žen Bohumila Hrabala’ by Alena Plavcová and Tomáš Mazal.⁶ She is the ‘Dubenka’ who figures so prominently in Janáček’s paper (p.65ff.). The fifth of Hrabal’s women was

Eliška Plevová, known as Pipsi, whom he married on 8 December 1956 and who died on 31 August 1987; her importance to his work is discussed in the chapter by Pynsent (p.125ff.).

Yet any rebelliousness in Hrabal was little more than bumptiousness; he never, for example, allied himself with the main dissident movements of the post-1968 period, which some held against him. He was, however, quite content to see his works circulate in illicit editions, whether of the *samizdat* type, or published anonymously abroad and smuggled back into Czechoslovakia along with the output of the numerous emigré publishing houses of the period in Germany, Austria and Canada. It may well have suited the authorities to have a living, and essentially harmless, entertainer around, especially given the perceived similarities between Hrabal and such other writers as Jaroslav Hašek; Hašek was himself published in various comprehensive editions throughout the Communist years. James Wood sees the success of the film version of *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Carefully Watched Trains, 1965) as having made him ‘untouchable. Yet he could still be unprintable [inside Czechoslovakia]: once the Soviet tanks rolled in, Hrabal [...] was silenced again’⁷ during the first half of the 1970s.

Among his contemporaries, Hrabal’s popularity is perhaps comparable to that of Milan Kundera or Josef Škvorecký (also published abroad under the ‘old régime’), and the evidence is that he did have qualities which have given him not only an enduring appeal, but secured him, on his home ground, considerable attention by literary scholars. I refer in particular to the preparation of the *Collected Works* critical edition, completed in 1997, of which the last, nineteenth, volume is the definitive guide to all previous editions, with complex name and subject indexes and a bibliography of the copious secondary literature to date.

By contrast, Hrabal’s popularity abroad was slower to take off than that of Kundera⁸ or Škvorecký, but gradually, if belatedly, a number of his works have appeared in English, usually in more than one printing.⁹ This is probably due above all to Hrabal’s skills as a story-teller ‘in an earthy conversational style’ and the ‘profundity of his humour’;¹⁰ there is no shortage of good yarns in all his collections of short-stories, many of which are — perhaps more like those of Anton Chekhov than Jaroslav Hašek — readily transferrable from their native environment and accessible to readers from non-Czech environments.¹¹

The relative success of Hrabal in terms of reader reception in English is still to be matched by the attention paid to him by literary scholarship, which has been much stronger in the German-speaking world; this may do no more than confirm the broad general affinities between Czechs and

Germans. The present volume seeks to be a serious contribution to Hrabal scholarship in English, one of its merits being the mixture of voices which it contains: from Hrabal's home ground (Janáček, Pilař), Britain (Beasley-Murray, Chirico, Pynsent, Short) and Switzerland (Stolz-Hladká).¹²

In great measure, Hrabal's popularity attaches to his characters, many of whom are anything but run-of-the-mill types. Or they are basically ordinary 'types', but doing odd things or finding themselves in unusual situations which demand peculiar responses. The hapless young station despatcher of *Ostře sledované vlaky*, the resourceful, not to say devious, Dítě of *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* (I served the King of England, 1980)¹³ (both discussed by James Wood, see note 7), and both the irrepressible Uncle Pepin and the zany mother figure in *Postři iny* (Cutting it Short, 1976), all of whom can be appreciated in available English translations, are just four examples.

A core type is the *pábitel*, a key term in Hrabal, which has been translated barely adequately, but *faute de mieux*, as 'palaverer'.¹⁴ The average Czech thinks he or she knows exactly what is meant, though often finds it hard to define; the adopted English equivalent(s) can convey but a fraction of the content of the original. However, one Czech attempt at definition may suffice: 'The *pábitel* looks for poetry in everyday reality [...], he defends himself against uglified phraseology and the mannerism of forms of communication. He amuses and grabs our attention with his entirely fresh, unhackneyed way of seeing things.'¹⁵ In fact Hrabal's own image is the very embodiment of a *pábitel*, and he does grab the attention and amuse; indeed he saw in his own nature a playfulness that then governed his approach to writing, a condition expressed recurrently, in his conversations with László Szigeti, as 'ludibrionism'.¹⁶ In his work there is no shortage of comic, or tragicomic situations, and some discreet political and social satire, and no lack of the linguistic, often unconscious humour to which these give rise; much of it is drawn second-hand from the unconscious *pábitels* of the world in which Hrabal moves as its 'recorder'.

Although in many senses unique, Hrabal owed a considerable, and frequently acknowledged, debt to a wide range of precursors and contemporaries, both Czech and non-Czech. However, when, in his less obviously 'literary' works, exemplified by *Klíčky na kapesníku*, he describes those whom he himself recognises as having influenced or inspired him, or whom he admires, it can sometimes look like little more than name-dropping. Among the countless names Hrabal cites with most persistence are those of the writers Apollinaire, Dostoyevsky, Hašek, Joyce, Kafka, Kerouac and Rabelais (to mention but a few¹⁷) and the philosophers Freud, Hegel, Schopenhauer and, above all, Lao-Tse. This naturally invites closer

inspection in order to ascertain how deep the influences go. Two essays in this volume look closely into the nature and extent of Hrabal's debt to yet other names which he frequently quotes: Pilař discusses two of Hrabal's contemporaries from the Czech underground who will be less familiar to the English-speaking reader, Vladimír Boudník and Egon Bondy (p.58ff.), while Chirico provides a close analysis of Hrabal's debt to the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti. (p.11ff.)

A reading of several of the chapters herein reveals Hrabal's debt to the Surrealists, which Hrabal himself acknowledged, while Pilař's paper also serves to introduce the reader to such related Czech phenomena as *Explosionalism* and *Total Realism*, with which Hrabal had obvious sympathies and some involvement. Beasley-Murray discusses Hrabal in a rather broader avant-garde context, including Surrealism, Poetism and Neopoetism (p.83ff.). Less frequently recognised by Hrabal himself is any direct debt to the biblical, if not Christian, tradition (though he does often mention Jesus). Zuzana Stolz-Hladká's thesis on his view of the world and the word as cyclical regeneration, revealed through the attitude to the human body, is a thoughtful contribution to this part of Hrabal's thinking (p.35ff.). On its more 'spiritual', if not 'mystical' plane, it comports well with his oft-repeated account of his practical working method. This consists, at its crudest, in 'cutting and pasting' chunks of text, his own or another's (as in *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel* [this city is in the joint care of its inhabitants; 1967],¹⁸ which, incidentally, opens with an image of a human body), transforming one work into another, or generating one work out of another.

The range of genres in Hrabal's work is broad. He began as a poet, an area in which least critical attention has been paid to him;¹⁹ nor has any of his poetry been translated. Chirico's chapter goes a long way to supplying these omissions (including some small samples in translation). In prose, Hrabal produced several collections of short stories; the important novella *Ostře sledované vlaky*; the picaresque novel *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*; the quasi-autobiographical trilogy, whose authorial ambiguity is discussed in the chapter by Pynsent (p.97ff.); and works which incorporate the words of others either explicitly and (allegedly) *verbatim* — above all, *toto město...*, which also contains another's photographs as pictorial text — or freely reworked *passim* in many of his other works (his 'citational style', as Chirico describes it). This is an important part of his method, as he makes clear in various essays and interviews. In his own words, he is not a writer (*spisovatel*), but a recorder, 'writer-down' (*zapisovatel*) of events and the words by which others comment on them. Another genre, originally described by Hrabal as the 'novel-interview', the dubiety of

which is discussed in the context of multi-voice works in the essay on p.59ff., is represented by *Kličky na kapesníku*; in reality it is an interview pure and simple, conducted over several days by the Slovak-Hungarian journalist, László Szigeti. In the interview, Szigeti elicits a vast amount of intimate detail on Hrabal's life, work and working methods, likes and dislikes, and the people, especially writers and philosophers, living and dead, whom he admires or by whom he is aware of having been influenced. The undoubtedly subjective account is rendered even more subjective by the evidence of the postscripts, which reveal that Hrabal was able to edit the transcription, and clearly by more than merely deleting ums and ers and false starts. On the other hand, the work, at least in its first edition, was given a measure of spurious objectivity by the inclusion of photographs (by Tibor Hrapka) taken during the interview, with captions in the form of quotations direct from the text; the inference is that this, a particular caption, is what was being said at the moment at which the shutter clicked, for which, however, there is simply no evidence.

These are by no means the only photographs of Hrabal, whose occasionally narcissistic nature clearly made him a willing subject. Some of the best, covering his whole life and including several that are not obviously posed, are included in Monika Zgustová's biography of the writer, *O životě a díle Bohumila Hrabala. V rájské zahradě trpkých plodů* (On the Life and Work of Bohumil Hrabal. In the Paradise Garden of Bitter Fruits; Prague, 1997). Potentially more objective than either the quasi-autobiographical works or the Szigeti interviews, even this highly literary biography was 'read and authorized' by its subject, after Zgustová had compiled it on the basis of conversations with Hrabal himself; it does, however, also contain details culled from conversations with his 'friends and opponents'.

In a volume of essays as restricted as the present one, it is not surprising that some elements of the Hrabal persona do not receive an airing. The reason is their relative triviality, though I would maintain that they are worth a mention. One is Hrabal's passion for football, hence the very title of *Kličky na kapesníku*. The man whose skills Hrabal so admired was the Hungarian Nándor Hidegkuti, one of the magicians of the Hungarian 'golden team' of the 1950s that was responsible for the unforgotten defeat of England at Wembley. The particular significance of football in general and Hidegkuti in particular is that they provide Hrabal with a useful metaphor for the twists in his life and the turns in his plots.

Another aspect of Hrabal's character which does not come out as strongly as it might in these essays (though there is a reference in Pynsent's paper) is his attachment to animals other than man. This is evinced most clearly in, again, *Kličky*, which contains recurrent references

to the part played in Hrabal's life by his cats, which he loved without reserve; even his eventual culling of them, when they proliferated well beyond what even a 'normal' cat-lover would find tolerable, is laboriously portrayed as an act of love. Relatively few other animals play a part in his work, but he does have, for example, a sensitive account of a lovelorn swan in *Kličky na kapesníku* and evinces sympathy for the cattle crammed in trains in *Ostře sledované vlaky* and the dray horses in *Postři iny* (rather different are the animals as food in *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*²⁰). Where it occurs, the intensity of the evidence of Hrabal as an animal-lover generally exceeds anything related to the people in his life. In this connection, the use to which he put his wife, as a hapless alter ego, in the autobiographical trilogy, might be thought purely egotistical. And his even affectionate use of his mother, stepfather and Uncle Pepin in *Postři iny* and elsewhere does not really attach to them as kin, but simply as yet more of the people that inhabit his world of weirdos and otherwise exceptional types.

The apparent affection which Hrabal evinces for dumb creatures means that it came as no particular surprise when the reports of his death suggested that he had fallen from his hospital window as he fed the pigeons. The alternative theory that he in fact committed suicide actually fits better with both his state of health (and mind) and the various things he wrote about intending one day to take his own life. (On Hrabal's attitude to death see, again, the chapter by Pynsent.) His close friend and commentator, Radko Pytlík, is in little doubt that it was suicide, in part simply as the realisation of Hrabal's stated intention, in part on the basis of the topography of the hospital room and window, from which it would be have been difficult to fall by accident.²¹

I began with references to the popularity of Hrabal at home and abroad and to the translations into English. His international prestige, if the extent of published translations can be taken as a safe measure, is quite striking. The *Collected Works* lists editions of his works in Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Spanish, Swedish and Turkish;²² in practice this means that his appeal has not yet extended much beyond Europe and North America.

In terms of recognition from abroad, the ultimate accolade, and a kind of *quid pro quo* for Hrabal's own acknowledged debt to the Hungarian playwright and short-story writer István Örkény,²³ came with the publication of a book in which Hrabal's name figured in the title, namely Péter Esterházy's *Hrabal Könyve* (The Book of Hrabal, Budapest, 1990).²⁴

Notes

- 1 For a brief biography of Hrabal in English see James Naughton (ed.): *Traveller's Literary Companion: Eastern and Central Europe* (Brighton, 1995), pp. 121–22; also numerous other references *passim* to Hrabal therein.
- 2 Only a century earlier Libeň had been a village surrounded by vineyards. It was overrun during the nineteenth century by mixed industry, becoming a town in its own right in 1898, only to be absorbed by Prague in 1901.
- 3 'Moje Libeň' is quoted in full, in lieu of a foreword, in a history of Libeň, Josef Tomeš's *Libeňskou minulostí* (Prague, 1989). Hrabal writes, *inter alia*: 'Libeň is my life-belt,' and also that: 'all Libeň's inhabitants struck me as being in the same mould [*ze stejného těsta*] as me.' Tomeš notes, after brief portraits of two of Hrabal's precursors in this part of Prague, the Decadent Karel Hlaváček (1874–98) and the gypsified anarchist poet Karel Pokorný (alias Karel or Karló Romský, alias Čechikáno Rom, ??–1916), that 'Hrabalian characters have a long tradition in Libeň' (p.31). In a much revised version of his book (Prague, 2001), where the extract from 'My Libeň' is reduced to a fraction (pp. 7–8), Tomeš still places Hrabal within the Libeň literary tradition (pp. 49–56), but accords him pride of place as *the* writer who 'first brought the phenomenon of Libeň into Czech literature and, in effect, the literature of the world' (p.56).
- 4 I remember an occasion in the early 1990s when his moroseness took a long time to yield to something approaching merriment. This was at a informal gathering, in a Bristol pub, with a group of local students of Czech. It occurred to me at the time that the possible cause was that Hrabal was not the sole focus of the event, a British Council-sponsored UK trip on which he was 'partnered' by the Slovak writer Pavel Vilikovský. This is in part borne out by the first quotation given by Pynsent on p.100.
- 5 For a variety of reasons, proposed titles of the translation in preparation are *Pirouettes on a postage-stamp* or *Spinning on a Sixpence*; the (recurrent) allusion is to the deft twisting and turning of a footballer in a confined space. There is also a possible pun in the title, given that Cz. *klička* also means either of the loops in a bow-knot, hence there is a possible association of tying knots in the corner of a handkerchief as an aid to memory — not inappropriate in a book largely devoted to reminiscences.
- 6 *Pátek Lidových novin*, 23.6.2000, pp. 24–27.
- 7 'James Wood writes about the life, times, letters and politics of the Czech novelist Bohumil Hrabal', *The London Review of Books*, 4 January 2001, pp. 14–16 (15) (hereafter 'Life, times, letters'). This is a lively and considered appraisal of Hrabal's work in the form of a review article on the English translations of five key works. (Republished as 'Bohumil Hrabal's comic world' in Id.: *The Irresponsible Self. On Laughter and the Novel*, London, 2004, pp. 142–54.)
- 8 Michael Burri, in a review of Peter Steiner's *Deserts of Bohemia*, suggests that the 'absence of such gestures of protest [i.e. such as found in Kundera and other writers who proclaimed themselves to be dissidents or were so perceived abroad, D.S.] in the works of Bohumil Hrabal hints significantly at why this author received such an exceptionally poor response among the Anglo-Saxon readership' ('Česká literatura ve stínu politiky', *Lidové noviny*

— *Orientace*, 30 June 2000, p. 21). I think he may have underestimated the response (see next footnote), though it is true that Hrabal's name does not automatically convey the same 'notoriety' that attaches to such as Kundera.

- 9 See the list of English translations on pp. 123–24. The obvious exception to the slow take-off of Hrabal in English is the case of *Ostře sledované vlaky*, which first appeared in 1968. The popularity of this work alone is attested by its re-issue over the years under no less than three English titles, all from the same translator, with a second responsible for the English rendering of the screenplay of the no less successful and popular film version of the novel. The impact of the film, 'a dark masterpiece of Czech cinema', endures: in a recent interview, the director Roger Michell recognises it as *the* film that changed his life. See Fergal Byrne: 'So much to learn from Milos', *Evening Standard* (London), 13.11.2003, pp. 30–31.
- 10 [Robert B. Pynsent] 'Hrabal, Bohumil' in Jonathan Law (ed.): *European Culture: a Contemporary Companion* (London, 1993, p. 180).
- 11 James Wood ('Life, times, letters', note 7) is among recent English writers to have described Hrabal's similarities to, and differences from both Hašek and Chekhov.
- 12 Other more recent English-language contributions to the study of Hrabal include Laura Shear Urbaszewski's Bakhtinian analysis: 'Rethinking the grotesque in Hrabal's fiction: carnival as a model for *Closely Watched Trains*', *Brown Slavic Contributions, Vol. XIII: Modern Czech Studies*, Providence: Dept. of Slavic Languages, Brown University, 2000, pp. 34–46, and Robert Porter's 'Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997): Small people and tall tales', in Id. *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Czech fiction: Comedies of Defiance*, Brighton and Portland, 2001, pp. 52–86.
- 13 This is the established English translation of the title, which is arguably a little unfortunate since it suggests the service of a lackey or service in some military capacity. In fact the verb in Czech relates either to service in a shop or, in the particular case of the work in question, serving at table. A more fitting translation, and the one used by Tim Beasley-Murray (p.83ff.) is, then, 'I waited on the King of England'.
- 14 Also as 'bletherer', by, for example Pynsent (see Note 10).
- 15 Radko Pytlík on *Ostře sledované vlaky* in the Afterword to Bohumil Hrabal: *Tři novely*, Prague 1989, p. 326. James Wood describes 'palavering' as 'almost a form of stream-of-consciousness [...] in which characters associate and soliloquise madly. [...] This palavering is really anecdote without end.' ('Life, times, letters', p. 14). Robert Porter (Note 12) also analyses *pábení* and *Pábitelé* in the opening section of his paper.
- 16 In *Klíčky na kapesníku*, *passim*.
- 17 The full list is impressive; it can be retrieved from the complete index of names occurring in Hrabal's writings in the final volume of the Collected Works edition. See Miroslav Červenka *et al.* (eds): *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala, svazek 19*, Prague, 1997, pp. 115–54 (hereafter *SSBH 19*).
- 18 Hereafter *toto město...*; the absence of capitalization of the first word is deliberate. See p.59ff., especially p. 63.
- 19 One exception to this is Jaroslav Kladiva, who, in *Literatura Bohumila Hrabala. Struktura a metoda Hrabalových děl* (Prague, 1994; written some fifteen years earlier), insists that Hrabal's entire *œuvre*, including the early

poetry, forms a unit, a whole, moreover one in which the literary and the philosophical are inseparable. It could also be argued that there is some unity in the fact that the women in Hrabal's life invariably led to writing; with the first three, Jiřina Sokolová (Georgina), Olinka Micková and Blanka Krauseová, the inspiration came in verse, with the last, April Gifford, in the form of 'letters'. The unique role of his wife Eliška was mentioned earlier.

- 20 It contains an account of a banquet in which a camel is stuffed in turn by progressively smaller animals. Note also the range of animals occurring in one of the poems quoted by Chirico.
- 21 The case for suicide, supported by a wide range of literary allusions and evidence drawn from Hrabal's own works and from conversations which Pytlík had with him over the years, is presented in 'Koridor smrti Bohumila Hrabala (Náhoda, nebo sebevražda)' (Bohumil Hrabal's corridor of death [Chance or suicide]), in *Koridor smrti Bohumila Hrabala a jiné záhady literárního světa: Psychologické a detektivní příběhy spisovatelů*, Prague, 1998, pp. 3–18. See also the section on 'Kouzelná flétna' on p. 45 in the present volume.
- 22 See *SSBH 19*, pp. 278–301. Unrecorded there are Masuo Tasai's translations into Japanese.
- 23 Discussed at length by Hrabal in the conversations with Szigeti in *Klíčky na kapesníku*.
- 24 In English, as *The Book of Hrabal*, translated by Judith Sollosy, Budapest (Corvina), London (Quartet), 1993. In this rambling novel, in which the lives of a young intellectual couple are shadowed by two members of the Hungarian security services (in the guise of somewhat Rushdiesque 'angels'), Hrabal, or his spirit, is the sounding-board or pillar that helps the woman in particular, who is pregnant and in two minds as to whether to have an abortion, to retain her sanity.

Towards a Typology of Hrabal's Intertextuality: Bohumil Hrabal and Giuseppe Ungaretti

David Chirico

'Until I was twenty years old, I didn't have a clue what writing was, what literature was,'¹ wrote Bohumil Hrabal, to open his short autobiographical text, 'Proč píšu?' (Why do I write?).² As elsewhere in Hrabal's writings, 'twenty' is a turning point between a youth of unmediated experience, marked by admiration of the Elbe valley and repeated failure at school, and an adulthood of other people's words and images. What inevitably soon follows is the beginning of Hrabal's own literary practice, 'and so I wrote my confidential diary, that lover's correspondence of mine...';³ the intimate diary and the lover's correspondence depend upon a process of reflection, 'and so I wrote by the law of reflection' or, as described more expansively in another version of the text 'and so I played with my life, by the law of reflection I transposed multidimensional reality in abbreviated form into the one-dimensional lines of the text.'⁴ Reality is opposed to text, multidimensional to unidimensional; and the process of writing becomes a game of transposition, both a reflection and an abbreviation, a flattening of 'polyhedral reality' onto 'white pages'.⁵

Such attempts to explain the origin of a literary career by metaphorizing the writing process are typical of Hrabal's autobiographical writings and rewritings. Also typical is the passage which links the first exposure to literature, at the age of twenty, with his own literary activity:

Even today I am thrown into permanent euphoria by the beloved writers of the years of my youth and I know off by heart not only François Rabelais' *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, but also Louis Céline's *Mort à crédit* and the poems of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and even today I read my Schopenhauer and in recent years my teacher has been Roland Barthes...⁶

The list of authors referred to varies within Hrabal's autobiographies, but their place, somewhere between Hrabal's reality and Hrabal's text, is common to most. In 'Proč píšu?', the list ends on one of Hrabal's three-dot pauses, then resumes:

But it was Giuseppe Ungaretti who inspired me then, when I was twenty, and it was under his influence that I began to write verse... And so I stepped out onto the thin ice of writing.⁷

With the emphatic inversion of the sentence, and its position after the pause, Hrabal pre-empts a reaction of surprise that the word Ungaretti should appear in the company of the others; among the bona fide anti-establishment figures, Ungaretti's name is unexpected.

In one of the few studies of Hrabal's early poetry, Miroslav Červenka also registers this incongruity. Among works showing affinities with Poetism and Surrealism Červenka finds a set of poems in short-lined free verse, whose 'godfather was a quite different poet'.⁸ Referring to Hrabal's statement, in 'Předmluva' (Foreword), that he had received a copy of Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto*, translated into Czech, from a friend, Červenka notes:

The debut of the Italian master [...] played a role which we would hardly expect from this delicate, spiritual, if not yet entirely hermetic poetry. [...] The dreamy atmosphere, from which the poem blossoms as if involuntarily and fumblingly, before dying away listlessly back into dream, was taken by the Nymburk novice poet from this so distant model.⁹

This 'quite different' poet, whose role in Hrabal's development 'we would hardly expect', is 'so distant' not only because he is Italian, but also because he sits uneasily with the anti-metaphysical Poetists, whose playful influence Červenka has detected in other early Hrabal works.

The following study will take as its starting points both the incongruity of Ungaretti as precursor to Hrabal, and Hrabal's repeated allocations to the Italian poet of precisely that role. In doing so, it will lead in two directions: first, towards an examination of a certain Avant-garde aesthetic, introduced in Hrabal's first work and repeatedly transformed through his literary development (thus revealing the importance of Hrabal's poetry in establishing his prose aesthetics); secondly, towards an examination of the nature of intertextual relationships as such in Hrabal's texts, and of the foregrounding in those texts of textual relations with the works of other writers. Ungaretti will appear both as a generator of potential hypotexts for Hrabal's early work and as an object of metatextual reflection and intertextual citation in Hrabal's late work.¹⁰ The result is a test-case analysis which could (and should) be complemented by analyses of other writers such as Eliot, Céline, Barthes and so on, with whom Hrabal's texts are in similar meta-, hyper- and intertextual relations. Any such attempt to overlay critical and theoretical examinations is prone to awkward slip-pages between the two frameworks.¹¹ Nevertheless, the relationship

between Hrabal's 'source' texts and his explicit references to these texts is a crucial (and little examined) one. The imbalance between Hrabal's repeated claims of indebtedness to Ungaretti and the scant textual evidence of such a debt is both the generative paradox and the methodological headache of the present study.

Three groups of Hrabal texts will be looked at in turn, each illustrative of a different type of intertextuality. The first section will look at the autobiographical, or literary autobiographical, texts, in which Hrabal signposts his literary development with sequences of proper names. The name Ungaretti appears in twelve of these metatextual texts, all written in prose and mostly written towards the end of Hrabal's life.¹² These provide a location for Hrabal's considerations of originality and repetition, innovation and influence, and for the establishment, under the explicit influence of Roland Barthes, of a notion of avant-garde 'écriture'. The second section will then turn to Hrabal's early free verse, the texts for which he has claimed the influence of Ungaretti.¹³ These texts will be examined for the hypotextual presence of Ungaretti's poetry, which will in turn raise questions about Hrabal's position between a metaphysical aesthetic of representation and an intertextual aesthetic of re-ordering. Finally, the brief third section will approach the late text 'Dubnové ídy' (Ides of April), in which Hrabal's only direct and referenced citation of Ungaretti occurs.¹⁴ 'Dubnové ídy' is, in turn, exemplary of the 1990s prose works in which Hrabal's late intertextual practice of plagiarism and citation is made explicit.

1. Metatexts and influence: Hrabal's autobiographies

In the nineteen-volume complete works of Hrabal, the word 'Ungaretti' appears sixteen times. In all but one case, the word appears in autobiographical prose, and in all but two is specifically attached to or juxtaposed with descriptions of the writer's beginnings: 'I began with admiration [...] I wrote my first poems to [Ungaretti's] model,'¹⁵ 'I remember that [...] I began to write my reflective lyrics, inspired by Giuseppe Ungaretti,'¹⁶ 'And in those days I was already writing my reflective little poems, a sort of variations on Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto*,'¹⁷ and so on. In each of these examples, the relationship between the autobiographical character and the earlier writer is figured, albeit in different ways ('to Ungaretti's model', 'inspired by Giuseppe Ungaretti', 'variations on Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il Porto Sepolto*'), raising the question of the author's individuality and originality in relation to the preceding writer. The references to Ungaretti are dispersed over a period of at least thirty

years, from the 1964 'Kus řeči' essay to the 1992 letter; they are however, concentrated in the 1980s, when Hrabal's obsession with writing and revision of his autobiography flourished.

In many cases, Hrabal uses lists of names, similar to the one already seen in 'Proč píšu?' In some cases these lists produce pantheons, with, for example, in 'Kdo jsem' (Who I am): 'Mr Louis Ferdinand Céline, Ungaretti, Camus, Master Erasmus of Rotterdam, Ferlinghetti and Kerouac.'¹⁸ Hrabal is rather fickle in these hit parades, and the American writers in particular seem to move in and out of the constellations of names at random. Céline and Ungaretti, however, are almost permanent fixtures. Sometimes, Hrabal tries to establish a revolutionary role for his individual names. Marx, Mallarmé and Rimbaud, for example, form an unlikely but recurring trinity, linked by their calls to change. 'Mallarmé's phrase: Change words, like Rimbaud's: Change life, and like Marx's: Change the world.'¹⁹

The criterion for membership of this particular list is to be a revolutionary. Elsewhere, the criterion is to be a teacher. This second type of list is often a more specifically Avant-garde one, where Hrabal enumerates writers from between the wars, to establish the context of his own verse-writing débuts. This practice, the construction of sequences of proper names as signals of avant-gardeness, was itself a much-frequented technique among Avant-garde theorists. (See Teige's manifestos, for example, or Marinetti's list of 'ins' and 'outs', or Wyndham Lewis's blastings.) Typical is the 1986 interview with Ján Kövesdi: 'My teachers were Ungaretti, Nezval, Apollinaire, and later the Surrealists, Baudelaire, Céline.'²⁰

Here, Ungaretti is stylized as a 'teacher' rather than a revolutionary. The concrete nature of his appearance in Hrabal's autobiographies (he, or his book *Pohřbený přístav*, the translation of *Il porto sepolto*, a gift from Antonín Frýdl) allows him to appear as a *dramatis persona*. Sometimes his teaching is unspecified, but more often it is linked to specific practices, as in 'Předmluva':

[...] I had nobody to whom I could boast about what I had written, how with my first words I had designated my world, my town, as I had learnt to do by reading the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti [...]²¹

Elsewhere, there is no mediation by the act of reading: 'Visual poetry, [...] as the same Giuseppe Ungaretti also taught me.'²²

The poets quoted are able to act as Hrabal's early teachers because they share a moment of visual admiration for the world. Hrabal stylizes a lack of education, lack of teachers, into his pre-twenties years, and it is

therefore important that his later teachers will share the *obdiv* (admiration) which necessarily predated his own literary activities.

Ungaretti, as the first teacher of all, however, not only gives a model for poetic admiration, but also instructions as to what to do with it. In 'Předmluva' we read:

The first proper book, which I received from the painter Antonín Frýdl, Giuseppe Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto*, gave me a set of instructions on how to give vent to an excess of images by writing. [My emphasis.]²³

The result was the opening of a 'flowing tap from my head'; and the way Ungaretti encouraged this self-improvement was to show Hrabal, first, how to 'designate my world, my town' with words; then 'he showed me how with words I could make a poem.'²⁴ Ungaretti — unlike all the other figures of Hrabal's pantheon, with the exception of Mallarmé, and in a more concrete way even than he — contributes technical and practical instructions about what to do with *words*. Where most of Hrabal's figures contribute ways of seeing, and as such are interchangeable with painters (see, for example, Sova and Manet in 'Vernisáž ve spolku českých bibliofilů' [A private view at the Society of Czech Bibliophiles]), Ungaretti is brought in by a 'real' painter, Antonín Frýdl, to show Hrabal what to do with words.

The two quotations just given from 'Předmluva' surround a passage describing the genesis of Hrabal's very first poem, under the guiding eye of Ungaretti. 'Předmluva', however, moves Hrabal's first person through further stages of his development, taking him away from Ungaretti. First, a series of ludic poems, influenced by Poetism, lead into an attempt to account for a whole life in terms of habit and game; and at this point a new 'teacher' appears, Ladislav Klíma.²⁵ While this wilful playfulness has already masked the spurting tap which had characterized the earliest work, the crucial break comes in the next paragraph, where Hrabal describes his first collection, *Ztracená ulička* (The lost alleyway), almost published by Hrádek publishing house in Nymburk in 1948. Here he included the free-verse poem 'Kolekce není. Mathias', in which he 'plugged human conversation and a certain earthiness into [his own] fate, [...] prefigured [his] future'.²⁶ The arrival of human conversation frightens away what Hrabal now, suddenly, characterizes as having been dreamy solitude all along:

This poem was not dreamt-up, was not the reflection of a walk through a little town, nor did it express emotion at the setting sun mirrored in a river... but was a cruel indictment of myself and an entry into the gloomy fate of humanity, which must be paid for... This poem was thus my first *écriture* [*rukopis*], a sad confession, a public accusation of my own self...²⁷

Human fate is paid for in the poem in a series of restaurant bills; the collage effects are influenced, as Hrabal points out, by *The Waste Land*; and as for it being his first *rukopis*, this is Hrabal's consistent translation of Barthes' *écriture*, here understood, following Barthes' early work, as an authentic style.²⁸ As Hrabal develops, then, in this literary autobiography, the individualist style in which he claims to have been inspired by (or influenced by, derivative of) Ungaretti is replaced by an authentic *rukopis* whose originality, paradoxically, is born out of its intertextuality (its dependence upon the 'human conversation' of others).²⁹

This paradox, with on the one hand an individuality which is derivative, and on the other a conversationality which is authentic and original, is expressed in 'Proč píšu?' with one of the varied repetitions of which Hrabal is fond. When the narrator of this autobiography starts writing, under Ungaretti's influence, he claims:

[...] so I wrote my confidential diary, that lover's correspondence of mine, my monologue addressed to others combined with an internal monologue... And I always had the feeling that what I had written was mine and mine alone.³⁰

A page (and a few years) later, after his exposure to conversation, and to Céline and Breton, his ownership of his own writing is lost:

[...] and so I continued to note down my monologue addressed to others and at the same time internal, but always without any commentary, and so being the first reader of my self, I used to have the feeling, when I gazed upon those written pages, that it had been written by someone else...³¹

It should be noted first that the names of writers, listed together at the start of Hrabal's 'Předmluva' as a continuous source of intertext, are here separated out in time (Ungaretti precedes, and is overlaid by, Céline). In this way they are made subordinate to the narrator's autobiographical narrative, which they initially seemed to generate. The initial polyphony, a Bloomian dialogue with dead writers,³² is therefore replaced by another, as the reader/writer becomes receiver and transmitter of immediate dialogism. Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' appears to be twice avoided here: first because Hrabal's texts, far from repressing the father figures of the precursors, ostentatiously display them;³³ and secondly because of the subordination of these 'names of the father' to the narrative development of the 'son'. However, an anxiety about influence, which I might formulate here rather as original, transcendent 'naming' anxious about intertextual repetition, remains in the undecidability between self ('what I had written was mine and mine alone') and other ('it had been written by someone else'). This contradiction, acted out by the figure of Ungaretti in

Hrabal's autobiographical texts (he is both the 'teacher' of 'admiration' and the admirer of the dead sun, ultimately rejected in Hrabal's own autobiographical development), finds a parallel in the next section of this study, which will suggest how Ungaretti's own poetic practice establishes, in thematics and form, models of originality and representative transcendence, problematized by Hrabal's practice from the start.

2. Naming or rearranging: Hrabal's early poems

In 'Předmluva' Hrabal credits Ungaretti with having taught him 'how with words I could make a poem...' This technical debt to Ungaretti echoes 'Commiato', the last poem in *Il porto sepolto*, addressed to the book's publisher Ettore Serra.³⁴ Poetry, according to the poem, is '[...] the world humanity / life itself / flowered from word / the limpid marvel / of a delirious ferment.'³⁵ Poetry may seem to be the world, humanity, life, and the ordering of lines in the poem leaves that possibility open for a while; but in fact the new life/world/humanity must blossom from the word. The contradiction between a horizontal realist aesthetic, in which the world's glories are reflected, or collaged together, into poetry, and a vertical, idealist one, in which the world must first be purified into the word, is one which informs all of Ungaretti's work, and one which forms the basis of Hrabal's account of his development beyond his Ungaretti period. In fact, the tension between transcendent representation and collage was present from the start in Hrabal, preventing his 'variations on Ungaretti' from coming too close to the teacher's model.

Ungaretti's long poem, 'I Fiumi' (The Rivers), for example, finds in the rivers of the narrator's past (the Nile, Seine and Isonzo) his own essence; when Hrabal wrote 'Řeka' (River), published in 1938, the poem was generated by a play on 'řeka-říkej' (river-tell/say); the river will tell the narrator that he is aging, that he will die, but 'Say what you will / I have pinned you / with the thumbtacks of words on white paper.'³⁶ Words are less the pure essence of reality, thrown up miraculously by its ferment, as in Ungaretti, than a conversational weapon, part of the ferment itself, with which reality can be held down. The metaphor recurs, with a concrete twist, in 'Předmluva': '[...] it was granted to me that with a typewriter I should nail words with language and behind language on the ephemeral white sheet of sales slips, of which during those years at the brewery I consumed kilos.'³⁷ Here the words are nailed to the white paper of the sales slips just as the latter are pinned to the writing desk. The implied opposition is the Mallarméan one between hopes for a pure language, fitting transparently over the material world whose reality it essentializes,

and fears of a contingent language, pinned in black matter to the white matter of the page. It is Ungaretti who provides Hrabal (and it is the Ungarettian hypotext which furnishes Hrabal's texts) with access to the linguistic crisis in poetry after Symbolism; Hrabal's texts juxtapose with this crisis a series of escapes from it.

Hrabal's essentially verse-writing period lasted the whole first decade of his literary activity. Works written between 1937 and 1947 are grouped in two typewritten collections, *Dny a noci* (Days and nights), marked 1939, and *Obrázky bez rámků* (Pictures without frames), marked 1940, and in the collection prepared for printing in 1948, *Ztracená ulička*. In addition, there are twenty-four uncollected, typewritten poems from the same period, mainly of indeterminate date, but grouped in a collection approved by Hrabal under the title *Křehký dluh* (A fragile debt). Within these collections, there is far more variation than Hrabal's characterisations in his literary autobiographical texts would imply.³⁸ All the poems published in Nymburk in magazines before the war are in short-lined free verse, suggesting that this form was produced by Hrabal at an initial stage. These short-lined free-verse poems were identified by Červenka as the site of Ungaretti's influence, and I will concentrate on them now.

'Kresba' (Drawing), one of the 'sunset' poems from *Dny a noci*, illustrates Hrabal's technique in these poems:³⁹

Kopce se loudají	The hills amble
ach	oh
velbloudí karavana s nákladem	camel caravan with cargo
jehličí	of pine-needles
podél pěnicího se potoka.	along the frothing stream.
S večerem blankytným	The pale blue evening
snoubí se únava	is wed to fatigue
v hlubokém snění opřená	in deep dreaming, leant
o slunce,	against the sun,
oči skal se klíží mlhou	the eyes of the rocks gum over with mist
a ohnivý pes	and a fiery dog
hlídá na nebeském palouku	guards on the heavenly lea
něžně se pasoucí	the tenderly grazing
broučky v jantaru.	beetles in amber.
Větve v lehkém vánku	Branches in the light breeze
přežvykují	chew
užaslé lupeny.	amazed leaves.

Seventeen lines have only 52 words, and there are no rhymes; there is no implied metre, although there is a tendency for short, dactylic lines,

particularly six-syllable ones (*Kopce se loudají, s večerem blankytným, snoubí se únava, něžně se pasoucí, úžaslé lupeny*), which frame and punctuate the poem. Concrete units of landscape ('The hills', 'The pale blue evening', 'Branches in the light breeze') initiate each of the three sentences, but are immediately transformed by metaphor, and the work of the metaphor is done by the verb: the hills 'amble', moving in ways that hills should not; the late blue evening 'is wed to fatigue';⁴⁰ the branches in the light breeze 'chew over' their leaves. Although there is no subject present in the poem, a process of enchantment is implied: the leaves, at the end of the poem, are 'amazed', not only because they find themselves being chewed by their mother branches, but also because they are witnesses to the surrealsing of the evening. Here is a poem celebrating the 'admiration' for the world which Hrabal claims to have found in Ungaretti.

Within the 'transformed' field, the landscape becomes subject to acoustic effect and word association on the level of the signifier. The hills become camels not only because of their shape and their initial, fantastic movement, but also because of the assonance and alliteration in *loudají* (amble), *velbloudí* (camel), while the stars are *broučky v jantaru* (beetles in amber) not only because of physical resemblance (actually as a photographic negative of dawning stars), and because the *ohnivý pes* (fiery dog), the dog-star Sirius, needs a flock to watch over, but also because the vowels 'ou-i-a-a-u' echo those that opened the long middle fantasy section ('ou-i-[e]-u-a-a'), which in turn hark back to the hills and the camels. The constant shifts between real and fantastic codes (there are pine-trees on the hills, so there must be bundles of pine-needles on the backs of the camels; the stream is in a fantastic landscape of acoustic association, so its line must read *podél pěnícího se potoka* [along the frothing stream]) suggest easy passage between two parallel worlds: this immanence of the irrational in the rational, and the mild exoticism, recall Konstantín Biebl's Poetist Surrealism in particular. The shortness of the lines, however, is unusual and, bringing emphasis upon individual words and phrases, reinforces the linguistic play.

Meanwhile, Giuseppe Ungaretti's international reputation between the wars rested entirely upon *L'Allegria*, a set of poems written from 1914 to 1919 in short (almost evanescent) free verse. Ungaretti, born in Alexandria in 1888 of Tuscan peasant parents, left Africa in 1912 for Paris, where he wrote poems in French and Italian under the influence of his friends Apollinaire and Cendrars. In 1916 he published his first volume, *Il porto sepolto*; this became the central section of the 1919 volume *Allegria di Naufragi*, and remained there as the volume was repeatedly pruned down

and republished as *L'Allegria*. The 33 poems of *Il porto sepolto*, each followed by a record of place and date, form a diary of Ungaretti's period in the army in the Julian Alps between December 1915 and October 1916. An example is 'Veglia' (Watch), sixteen short lines (only 41 words), divided into two stanzas, with the white space serving a mildly rhetorical purpose, dividing experience from reflection.

VEGLIA

Un' intera nottata
buttato vicino
a un compagno
massacrato
con la sua bocca
digrignata
volta al plenilunio
con la congestione
delle sue mani
penetrata
nel mio silenzio
ho scritto
lettere piene d'amore

Non sono mai stato
tanto
attaccato alla vita

WATCH

A whole night through
thrown down near
to a comrade
butchered
with his mouth
clenched
turned to the full moon
with the clutching
of his hands
thrust
into my silence
I wrote
letters full of love

Never was I
so
attached to life

Cima Quattro il 23 dicembre 1915⁴¹

The first nine lines build up a picture of a dead soldier, using nothing but realist details; the 'whole night through' providing a temporal frame for this still-life generates a series of five past participles which give a misleading impression of metric regularity. Apart from this, there is no acoustic play in the description, and therefore, in contrast to Hrabal's 'Scherzo' (v.i.), no pattern in the surface of the text to foreground the signifier and interfere with the illusion of isolated words eliding with isolated units of the signified.

Three of the participles fill whole lines, defining and concluding the previous noun in the first two cases, but in the third case continuing surprisingly into 'my silence'; where the first-person subject has previously only been implied ('thrown down' qualifies a missing subject who must also be the 'comrade' of the 'comrade'), here the subject's silence absorbs all the rigour of the still life, and converts it into letters of love; the envoi stanza

further the generalization, 'love' into 'life'. The critic Barberi Squarotti sees this passage from object through subject to abstraction or universalism as the driving force throughout Ungaretti's collection, the process which generates *allegria* in a war that Ungaretti is certainly far from celebrating.⁴² While this is a convincing argument, it does not take account of the very concrete, noisy presence of the objective reality, which resonates through the silence of the subject onto the immense universal itself.⁴³

Hrabal's autobiographical texts refer to Ungaretti's *Pohřbený přístav*. This was a translation of only the *Il porto sepolto* part of *L'Allegria*, published in a limited edition by Pásmo in 1934, with translations by Zdeněk Kalista, typography by Jindřich Štyrský and a cover illustration by Toyen. The unexpected participation of Surrealists, in an edition of a man who had already been condemned as hermeticist by the Italian left, helps to explain Ungaretti's juxtaposition with the Poetists in Hrabal's autobiographical texts. Besides, the juxtaposition of fellow descendents of Apollinaire is not so illogical. In addition to Kalista's translations, however, a number of Ungaretti poems had appeared in Adolf Felix's anthology, *Italští básníci 1900–1930*, published, with the assistance of future Avant-garde theorist Renato Poggioli, by the Prague Italian Institute in 1933. Hrabal's acquaintance with Felix's translations is proved by the fact that his only direct quotation of Ungaretti, in 'Dubnové ídy', is taken from 'Vánoce',⁴⁴ one of the eleven poems in the anthology which, unlike Kalista's translations, did not restrict itself exclusively to the *Il porto sepolto* section of *L'Allegria*.

An example from Ungaretti, alongside Kalista's translation, will show some of the deformations created in the passage from Italian to Czech. 'La notte bella' appears in *Il porto sepolto* as a counterpart to reflection by 'Monotonia' on the tedium of the physical process of the sky's disappearance at dusk; in 'La notte bella' the night is suddenly filled with the song of the stars.

LA NOTTE BELLA

Quale canto s'è levato stanotte
che intesse
di cristallina eco del cuore
le stelle

Quale festa sorgiva
di cuore a nozze

Sono stato
uno stagno di buio

KRÁSNÁ NOC

Jaký to zpěv se zvedl dnešní noci
stkávaje
z křišťalového echa srdce
hvězdy

Jaká to radost prostá
srdce při svatbě

Byl jsem
jak rybník tmy

Ora mordo	Ted' ssaji prudce
come un bambino la mammella	jak dítě prs
lo spazio	dálku
Ora sono ubriaco	Jsem opojen
d'universo	vesmírem

Devetachi il 24 agosto 1916⁴⁵

The poem's five stanzas are built around opening repetitions: the exclamatory 'Quale' (What!), twice, to lead into the unexpected and Mallarméan feast in the heavens; the emphatic present tense, 'Ora' (Now), twice introducing first-person verbs, and closing the poem with the subject's ecstasy. The middle stanza, alone without repetitive elements, opposes the opening stars above with darkness below, and the closing stanzas present ecstasy with an expression of past stagnation. Kalista's version loses the symmetry by failing to recreate the echo between the last two stanzas: the physical drunkenness of the last stanza loses its implied causal connection, through *ora*, with the suckling of space in the penultimate one, and the feast in the heavens is lost. The various stanza-ordering devices present through Ungaretti are not picked up on by Kalista, nor are they important to Hrabal, who never exceeds two stanzas in his short-lined free-verse poems.

Also typical of Kalista's translation strategy is the explanatory *jak* (like) in line 8. Ungaretti's mystical metaphor, an equation of subject and object, becomes a slightly banal simile in Kalista. A similar demystification is generated by the Czech translation of the final word, which shows one of the difficulties in translating Ungaretti: his use of countable nouns without articles (*Ora sono ubriaco / d'universo*: drunk with 'universe' rather than drunk with 'the universe'), making a countable, contingent phenomenon into an almost abstract substance, is almost unachievable in a language, such as Czech, without a definite article. This peculiarly Platonic naming of essence in Ungaretti is therefore lost to Hrabal's reading of him.

A similar example is in the poem 'Fratelli'/'Bratři' (Brothers), where the collective subject's *Parola tremante / nella notte / Foglia appena nata* becomes *slovo třesoucí se / nocí / jako list / sotva zrozený*.⁴⁶ This is a refusal of irrationality, a rationalization of mystical or mystifying metaphor into simile, on the part of the translator (though in 'Kresba', Hrabal suppresses the marker of comparison, following Ungaretti and the Symbolists); it also has a metrical effect: Ungaretti's purely nominal lines *uno stagno di buio* and *foglia appena nata* become subordinate to syntax in the Czech version. This suppresses one of the most important features

of Ungaretti's free verse, a *verginitá linguistica* (linguistic virginity), as Pasolini put it, residing in 'the strong and sculptured semanticity of the word, extremely unadorned'.⁴⁷

Ungaretti's poems are full of single-noun lines. Another example from 'La Notte Bella' is line 11, where *lo spazio* (space) is almost released from syntax into the white of the page. Kalista not only translates *lo spazio* as 'distance'; he is also obliged to put it in the accusative case, and its independence is reduced. Hrabal's shortest lines, too, are either verbs, or nouns in inflected cases, or, commonly, nouns and verbs introduced by *a* (and), submitting them, if not to syntactic, at least to syntagmatic structure. Again, this distances him from Ungaretti's linguistic practice, his use of the 'word transparent, the syntagm volatilized in weightless verbal nuclei';⁴⁸ far from being weightless and transparent, Hrabal's words are, as I have shown, thumbtacks to attach the transparent and volatile phenomena of nature to the white page.

The expression *ssát dálku* (to suckle on distance) from Ungaretti's poem appears in Hrabal's 'Scherzo', published in *Občanské listy* in 1938. This poem is unusual among Hrabal's short-lined free-verse texts in that it contains an explicit first-person subject.

Rozbitou	Through the broken
střechou starého ořechu	roof of the old walnut tree
tekly	flowed
zvonící stuhy měsíčního	chiming ribbons of moon
světla	light
a já sál stříbrnou dálku.	and I suckled on silver distance.
Spící ves	The sleeping village
dýmala	smoked
štěstím,	with happiness,
monotónní štěkot psů	the monotonous barking of dogs
odbíjel	struck
čas	the time
a supící vlak rozlomil	and the panting train broke
vonící tmu	the fragrant dark
cválaje kdesi krajem jak	galloping somewhere through the land like
měděný hřebec.	a copper stallion.
Okouzlen, ještě k ránu jsem	Enchanted, until morning I
popíjel	was sipping
z poháru noci, až zbyly	from the cup of night, until there remained
mi na dně	on the bottom [of my cup]
jen zrosené hvězdy. ⁴⁹	only the dewy stars.

Hrabal's poem imitates the alternation of line lengths in 'La Notte Bella' and other Ungaretti poems. However, Hrabal breaks his lines through strong syntactic bonds: adjective from noun (lines 1–2) and noun from adjective (lines 4–5).⁵⁰ The result is a series of short lines which detach themselves seemingly at random from a rushing narrative momentum: the line *monotónní štěkot psů odbíjel* (the monotonous barking of dogs struck) has to yap to fit between the sleepy happiness of the village and the isolation of 'the time'. This unsettled motion of the poem well matches the strange moonlit indecision between the monotony and excitement it describes, and the jolting but unwavering movement of the train; but if Ungaretti's effect is to leave words unadorned and virginal in space, Hrabal's is to have them break at random out of a narrative flow. Ungaretti's poem follows the object → subject → universal movement mentioned before, as the specifics of the night pass through the dark pool of the subject into the universe; Hrabal's poem also passes objects, less pared down, through the subject, but what remains is more of the same magically transformed reality with which the poem started; the stars scattered like sediment in the goblet of the night. Hrabal's poem does not have the universalizing ambitions of Ungaretti's 'Dionysiac pastoral':⁵¹ while Ungaretti's subject sucks at space to become drunk on the universe, Hrabal's subject, 'enchanted' by the magical objects it has created, sucks away distance to get a better view of them.

To conclude this section, then, it seems clear that Hrabal was formally intoxicated by the short-lined verse of Ungaretti, which served as a counter-influence to the forms of the Poetists and the Surrealists. At the same time, Hrabal later claims to have attempted to take from Ungaretti a notion of how to make poems out of words, and of a transparency of language to admiration and impression,⁵² generated by the isolated single word loaded with connotation. Finally, however, Hrabal fails to isolate his words, which always return to the sentence structures of the signifier.⁵³ In fact, the very presence of Ungaretti as a hypotext, albeit a hypotext misread through translation and transformation, illustrates the root of the crisis identified since the Symbolist period as Mallarméan: at the moment when literature claims to become most transcendent, it becomes most double (with the precursor text doubling the new text).⁵⁴ Hrabal's own celebrations of the signifier, of the presence of the already written in the Symbolist poem, are to be his best form of defence against the silence into which Symbolist writing is otherwise seen to be constrained to fall.⁵⁵

3. Intertext, citation and proper names: some concluding remarks

A reading of Hrabal through Ungaretti has shown up the recurrent conflict in the Czech writer between desire for a language able to capture the amazement of experience directly and desire for a commonplace, repeatable language. It is beyond the scope of this study to investigate the development of the citational style with which Hrabal was to resolve this conflict, but the Ungaretti–Hrabal textual relations suggest two directions Hrabal will take. On the one hand, Hrabal's texts tend towards constant reworkings, and become a set of rewritings of the self. *Vita d'un Uomo* (Life of a Man), the constantly changing 'complete works' into which Ungaretti drew his life's work, was to include, as equal participants in an internal dialogue, all variants of his texts.⁵⁶ Similarly Hrabal reworks and republishes, rejecting notions of the 'definitive' version in favour of notions of the dialogic self. One among numerous examples of this is the practice, already noted, of transposing verse works into prose, and preserving both versions.

At the same time as rewriting self, Hrabal commits himself to rewriting the texts of others. In 'Kdo jsem' he famously characterizes this practice as scandalous:

In particular, I read a lot, and then I quote a lot, and when I quote a lot, I forget to say where and from whom I am quoting. I am, in fact, a spoiler of corpses, a plunderer of noble sarcophagi. That is my character, and in it I am an innovator and an experimenter, always sniffing out where and what I can steal from dead and living writers and painters, and then, like a fox, using my brush to rub out the tracks that could lead to the place of the crime.⁵⁷

The practice of plagiaristic citation expounded here is important in the context of the essay's title. 'I am' a spoiler of literary corpses, my 'character' is to re-write what has already been written: in other words, the answer to the title's implied search for an individual is an intertextual one. Hrabal's novel *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too Loud a Solitude, 1980), in which the central character earns his living destroying and recycling books and simultaneously reconstituting himself from the random scraps of literature he reads, is Hrabal's concrete allegory for the intertextual process. Such a process dominates entirely the late letters to Dubenka, including 'Dubnové ídy', where Hrabal refers to Ungaretti for the last time in his life. After characteristic discussions of cats, Kafka, art, Barthes, illness, Central Europe and so on, the essay concludes with a fragmented set of quotations:

And the hangover blew away all that I had known until that morning, and I was left with the sharply illuminated... Leave me here, like a useless thing thrown into a corner... Ungaretti... and then Zen... What is the holiest thing in the world? A dead cat... And why? Because it is no longer useful... And Lao-tse: to be equal to your dust... and next to a dying body to be out of danger...⁵⁸

The Ungaretti quotation is from 'Natale'.⁵⁹ In an anti-climactic wartime interlude in Naples, the Italian poet yearns for dissolution into the warm comforts of familiar and inanimate matter, for oblivion in a corner. This moment, in which Ungaretti's union with the material world is one of exhausted abandonment rather than transcendent admiration, brings him close to Hrabal's other, Eastern models, particularly Lao-Tse.

The quotation from Ungaretti is thus used both thematically and metatextually as a model for citational writing. On the one hand, metatextually, Ungaretti is one of the texts into which Hrabal's own self can dissolve; on the other, he provides hypotexts which thematically express a dissolution into nothingness, uselessness, the morning after the Mallarméan feast. These are the 'mortal things' identified by Pasolini as one of the terms of the constant opposition in Ungaretti's poetry,⁶⁰ which seem, unexpectedly, to outlive the Ungarettian *obdiv* (admiration) in Hrabal's intertextual use of him.

Hrabal's 'teacher' Roland Barthes distinguished two types of influence:

[...] the authors on which one writes and whose influence is neither exterior nor anterior to what one says about them, and (a more classical conception) the authors whom one reads; but what comes to me from the latter? A sort of music, a pensive sonority... My head was full of Nietzsche... The influence was purely prosodic.⁶¹

Anyone who reads Ungaretti for half an hour and tries to write anything will find it emerging in short-lined free verse — he has, superficially, a very imitable style. But Ungaretti's metre, as Pasolini insists, was adapted for a very particular ideology; Hrabal's adoption of it serves to foreground his own interest in assemblage, in the associations that can be forced onto words from distant lexical and semantic fields, and from distant texts. When he describes writing his first poem in 'Předmluva',⁶² the repeated references to Ungaretti are interwoven with repeated citations of another foreign name: 'Underwood'. 'Un-garetti'/'Un-derwood': but Underwood is the make of typewriter on which Hrabal tapped out his first poems at weekends in the Nymburk brewery. Perhaps, finally, that is the place of Ungaretti in Hrabal's work: he belongs in the prosody of the rainy pre-war afternoons in Nymburk, in the clipped rhythm of the tapping machine, nailing onto the white paper the material words from which Hrabal will learn to assemble collages of intertext.

Notes

- 1 'Do dvaceti let jsem neměl ani zdání, co to je psaní, co to je literatura.' Bohumil Hrabal: *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, 12, p. 274. All quotations from Hrabal are taken from the nineteen-volume *Sebrané spisy* (Complete Works), Prague (hereafter *SSBH* followed by volume number and page number).
- 2 'Proč píšu?', *SSBH* 12, pp. 274–78, is an original typescript text, first published as part of a longer text, 'Proč píšu' (Why I write) in *Život bez smokingu* [Life without evening dress], Prague, 1986. See also *SSBH* 12, p. 415.
- 3 '[...] a tak jsem psal svůj důvěrný deník, tu svoji milostnou korespondenci.' *SSBH* 12, p. 274.
- 4 '[...] tak jsem psal v zákonu odrazu', *SSBH* 12, p. 275; '[...] tak jsem si hrál se svým životem, zákonem odrazu jsem mnohodimenzionální skutečnost převáděl ve zkratce na jednodimenzionální řádky textu.' *SSBH* 12, p. 267. This latter text, 'Předmluva', introduces Hrabal's *Životopis trochu jinak* (A not quite conventional biography), also published in 1986, here *SSBH* 12, pp. 265–73. The textological relationship between 'Předmluva' and 'Proč píšu?' is complicated (see *SSBH* 12, pp. 409–17); what is relevant here is that both originate in the mid-1980s and are part of Hrabal's efforts in that period to construct a literary autobiography.
- 5 *SSBH* 12, pp. 267, 274.
- 6 'V trvalou euforii mne uvádějí dodnes ti moji zamilovaní spisovatelé let mladosti a umím nazpaměť nejen Gargantuu a Pantagruela Françoise Rabelaise, ale i Smrt na úvěr Louise Céline a verše Rimbauda a Baudelaira a čtu si dodnes v Schopenhauerovi a poslední léta je můj učitel Roland Barthes...', *SSBH* 12, p. 274.
- 7 'Ale byl to Giuseppe Ungaretti, který mne v těch dvaceti letech inspiroval, a pod jeho dojmem jsem začal psát verše... A tak jsem vstoupil na tenký led psaní.' *Ibid.*
- 8 Miroslav Červenka: 'Hrabal veršem' in *Styl a význam*, Prague, 1991, pp. 192–213 (197).
- 9 'Prvotina italského mistra (1916) [...] sehrála úlohu, kterou bychom od této jemné, spirituální, byť naprosto ještě ne hermetické poezie sotva čekali. [...] Snové ovzduší, z něhož jakoby mimoděk a tápavě vykvete báseň, zase do snu malátně vyznívající, převzal začínající nymburský poeta z tohoto tak vzdáleného vzoru.' *Ibid.*
- 10 I draw my terminology from Gérard Genette, particularly in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE, and London, 1997. Genette distinguishes between hypertextuality ('any relationship uniting a text B [... the *hypertext*] to an earlier text A [... the *hypotext*], upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary'), metatextuality ('the relationship most often labelled "commentary". It unites a given text to another of which it speaks without necessarily citing it') and 'intertextuality' proper ('the actual presence of one text within another', in other words, quotation, plagiarism and allusion). These three are types of 'transtextuality', the set of modes of relationship between texts and other texts. Genette's use of the term 'transtextuality' (analogously to Julia Kristeva's 'transposition'), to refer to text–text relations as a whole, has not caught on, and I follow the consensus

in using ‘intertextuality’ to refer to the sum of all these types. To reduce confusion, I then use ‘intertextual citation’ in the more limited sense of Genette’s ‘intertextuality’. See Genette, *Palimpsests*, pp. 1–5, and the useful discussion in Graham Allen: *Intertextuality*, London, 2000, pp. 95–115.

- 11 See Genette’s notes on this problem in the ‘Avant-propos’ to his critical/theoretical reading of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* in ‘Discours du récit’, *Figures III*, Paris, 1972, pp. 67–69.
- 12 In addition to the 1986 texts, ‘Předmluva’ and ‘Proč píšu’, referred to above, the remaining ten are: one further autobiographical fragment (‘Kdo jsem’ [Who I am; typescript 1985, published 1989], *SSBH* 12, pp. 221–61); three essays (‘Kus řeči’ [A brief chat; 1964], *SSBH* 18, pp. 28–31; ‘Akademický slib vykonán’ [Academic promise carried out] (1970?), *SSBH* 18, pp. 9–21; ‘Zum ewigen Frieden’ [1985], *SSBH* 18, pp. 212–16); a transcription of a speech (‘Vernisáž ve spolku českých bibliofilů’ [Private view at the Association of Czech Bibliophiles; 1989], *SSBH* 17, pp. 337–44); and five interviews (‘Večer na formance’ [Evening at the tavern; 1965], *SSBH* 15, pp. 67–69; *Klíčky na kapesníku* [Twists and Turns on a Pocket-Handkerchief; 1984–5/1986], *SSBH* 17, pp. 7–126; ‘Rozhovor s Jánom Kövesdim’ [Conversation with Ján Kövesdi; 1986], *SSBH* 17, pp. 199–220; ‘Diamantové očko inspirace’ [The diamond eyelet of inspiration; 1989], *SSBH* 17, pp. 235–37; ‘Z besedy na Stanfordské univerzitě’ [From a discussion at Stanford University], *SSBH* 17, pp. 304–19).
- 13 Hrabal published nine poems in periodicals in 1937–38; these include his very first publications, and all are in short-lined free verse. The nine, and the handful of similarly early poems in similar metre, can all be found in *SSBH* 1. See also *SSBH* 1, p. 211 for notes on Hrabal’s early periodical publications.
- 14 ‘Dubnové ídy’ is dated 1.5.1992; it was first published as a pamphlet by Pražská imaginace on 5.5.1992, and as letter five of the fourth of Hrabal’s volumes of letters to Dubenka, *Aurora na mělčině*, in December 1992. It should be noted how quickly Hrabal’s texts reached a wide public in the early 1990s. Here, ‘Dubnové ídy’ will be read alongside the autobiographical ‘Kdo jsem’.
- 15 ‘[...] začínal jsem obdivem [...] Podle vzoru [Ungarettiho] jsem psal první básně.’ *SSBH* 18, p. 28.
- 16 ‘Vzpomínám, že [...] jsem začal psát tu svoji reflexivní lyriku, inspirován Giuseppem Ungarettim [...]’ *SSBH* 18, p. 212.
- 17 ‘A už jsem ten čas psal reflexivní básničky, jakési variace na Giuseppe Ungarettiho Pohřbený přístav.’ *SSBH* 18, p. 20.
- 18 *SSBH* 12, p. 224.
- 19 ‘Mallarméova věta: Změnit slova, tak jako Rimbaud: Změnit život, a tak jako Marx: Změnit svět.’ *SSBH* 12, p. 251. The impact of this revolutionariness is rather muffled by Hrabal’s declaration earlier in the same text that ‘I never wished to change either language or the world when I quoted Marx, when I quoted Rimbaud, when I quoted Mallarmé, I always wanted to change myself (‘Nikdy jsem si nepřál měnit ani řeč, ani svět, když jsem citoval Marxe, když jsem citoval Rimbauda, když jsem citoval Mallarméa, tak vždycky jsem si přál měnit sám sebe), *SSBH* 12, p. 221. In an earlier, less revisionist phase, writing in 1982, Hrabal had had no such doubts: “‘Change the world,” wrote Marx. “Change life,” wrote Rimbaud. “Change language,” wrote Mallarmé.

- That is the control of the writer from above.' ('Změnit svět,' napsal Marx. 'Změnit život,' napsal Rimbaud. 'Změnit řeč,' napsal Mallarmé. To je ta kontrola spisovatele shora.) *SSBH* 15, p. 152.
- 20 'Mými učiteli byli Ungaretti, Nezval, Apollinaire, později surrealisté, Baudelaire, Céline.' *SSBH* 17, p. 200. Here Baudelaire makes his usual appearance along with the Avant-garde.
- 21 '[...] neměl [jsem] nikoho, komu bych se pochlubil, co jsem napsal, jak prvními slovy jsem označoval svůj svět, svoje město, tak jak jsem se tomu učil četbou básníka Giuseppe Ungarettiho [...]', *SSBH* 12, p. 266.
- 22 '[...]vizuelní poezie, [...] tak jak mě to učil zrovna ten Giuseppe Ungaretti', *SSBH* 17, p. 308.
- 23 'První pořádná kniha, kterou jsem dostal od malíře Antonína Frýdla, Pohřbený přístav od Giuseppe Ungarettiho, mi dala návod, kterak lze ventillovat přemíru obrazů psaním.' *SSBH* 12, p. 265.
- 24 'Ukázal mi, jak lze ze slov udělat báseň.' *SSBH* 12, p. 266.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 'Zapojil lidský hovor a jistou ukostřenost k mému osudu, [...] předznamenal svou budoucnost.' *SSBH* 12, p. 269.
- 27 'Tato báseň nebyla vysněna, nebyla reflexem procházky městečkem, ani nevyjadřovala dojetí nad zapadajícím sluncem zrcadlícím se v řece... ale krutou obžalobou sebe sama a vstupem do lidského teskného osudu, za který se platí... Tato báseň tedy byla mým prvním rukopisem, tristní zpovědí, veřejným obviněním sebe sama...' *Ibid.*
- 28 See in particular *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, Paris, 1953, from which Hrabal quotes in the text in question (*SSBH* 12, p. 270) and elsewhere.
- 29 'Předmluva' travels on through Hrabal's writing, distinguishing what is only *reflection* from what is *écriture* (the *total realism* of 'Jarmilka' and the *engaged writing* of *Ostře sledované vlaky* are the next two examples of *écriture*). The idea of a genuine *écriture*, expressive of a genuinely lived style, is signalled in this essay largely through the use of repeated paragraph openings. The phrase: 'Now, when I can look at myself as if at a third person, I see [...]' (Teď, kdy se mohu sám na sebe podívat jako na třetí osobu, vidím [...]; *SSBH* 12, p. 265) is repeated in varied and gradually expanded form seven times; the crucial expansion comes immediately after the paragraph introducing the *écriture* idea: 'Now, when I can look at myself with an unusual gaze from above, when I am both the gazing sphinx and, at the same time the one upon whom she rests her severe eyes' (Nyní, kdy se na sebe mohu dívat neobvyklým pohledem shora, kdy současně jsem zírající sfingou i tím, na kterého ona upírá ty svoje přísné oči), *SSBH* 12, p. 270.
- 30 '[...] tak jsem psal svůj důvěrný deník, tu svoji milostnou korespondenci, svůj adresný monolog kombinovaný s monologem vnitřním... A měl jsem vždycky dojem, že to, co jsem napsal, je jen a jen moje.' *SSBH* 12, p. 274.
- 31 '[...] a tak jsem dál zapisoval ten svůj adresný a současně vnitřní monolog, ale vždycky bez komentáře, a jsa tak prvním čtenářem sebe sama, míval jsem dojem, že to napsal někdo jiný...' *SSBH* 12, p. 275.
- 32 'A poet [...] is not so much a man speaking to men as a man rebelling against being spoken to by a dead man (the precursor) outrageously more alive than himself.' Harold Bloom: *A Map of Misreading*, Oxford, 1975, p. 19.

- 33 For a questioning of Bloom's applicability to Lautréamont's similarly explicitly metatextual texts, see Roland Francois Lack, 'Intertextuality or influence: Kristeva, Bloom and the *Poésies* of Isidore Ducasse' in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.): *Intertextuality*, Manchester, 1990, pp. 130–42.
- 34 Ungaretti's *Il porto sepolto* was first published in 1916, then incorporated into later volumes of his poetry. All quotations here will be from Giuseppe Ungaretti: *L'Allegria*, Rome, 1936.
- 35 '[...] il mondo l'umanità / la propria vita / fioriti dalla parola / la limpida meraviglia / di un delirante fermento.' Ungaretti, *L'Allegria*, p. 76. In the Czech translation which Hrabal knew, the lines read: 'svět lidstvo / vlastní život / vykvetlý ze slova / je to světlý zázrak / blouznivého kvasu.' 'Na rozloučenou' in Giuseppe Ungaretti (trans. Zdeněk Kalista): *Pohřbený přístav*, Prague, 1934.
- 36 'Říkej, co chceš / vždyť jsem tě přišpendlil / napínáčky slov na bílý papír.' *SSBH* 1, p. 59.
- 37 '[...] mi bylo dopřáno přibíjet jazykem a za jazyk slova psacím strojem na prchavou bílou desku účtenek, kterých jsem za ta léta v pivovare spotřeboval kila [...]', *SSBH* 12, p. 267.
- 38 Four groups can be distinguished: these are prose poems, which make up more than half of *Dny a noci*; poems in very short-lined free verse; rhymed poems with more or less regular metre; and poems in free verse with long lines. These crude formal distinctions match thematic ones: while the prose poems and short free-verse poems are impressionistic landscapes or, sometimes, short sentimental narratives, the rhymed ones are playful erotic poetry showing the strong influence of Poetism; the long free-verse poems show an increasing tendency towards surrealistic use of collage, which culminates in the poem cycle *Kolekce není*. Mathias and Hrabal's early post-war prose. For an analysis of these four types, see Milan Exner, 'Nad lyrickými básněmi Bohumila Hrabala' in *Tvar* (1995) 18, pp. 10–11. For a discussion of the formal and thematic impact of Poetism on Hrabal's early verse, see Miroslav Červenka, 'Hrabal veršem', pp. 194–97. Červenka points out a continuum between the Poetism-influenced regular verse and the long free verse (with metre gradually loosening, rhyme becoming less systematic), and suggests that these two can be grouped together as a later stage. Hrabal's own failure to distinguish between the very different types of poetry he wrote before and during the war may also be due to the fact that, as with his occasional later verse, he was to transcribe nearly all of them into prose; in the case of the early works this was for a set of *Etudy*, prepared for publication as late as 1968, and included in *SSBH* 5.
- 39 *SSBH* 1, p. 34.
- 40 Here, the figurative use of *snoubit se* (to be wed) is within standard usage, but the verb's function in wedding two unlikes reactivates the concrete meaning.
- 41 Ungaretti, *L'Allegria*, p. 33. The 1934 Czech translation reads: 'Celou noc / vržen v blízkost / soudruha / rozbitého / s ústy / vyceněnými / obracenými k úplňku / zkřečovatelýma / rukama jeho / jež vznikly / v mé ticho / psal jsem / listy plné lásky // Nikdy jsem nebyl / tak jat úžasem / k životě.' From 'Bdění' in Ungaretti, *Pohřbený přístav*. Note the addition of *úžas* (wonder) to the poet's attachment to life in the penultimate line of the poem; Hrabal uses

obdiv (admiration) and *úžas* almost interchangeably at this period; Kalista's translation adds a Poetist admiration which is not made explicit in Ungaretti.

42 Squarotti: *Astrazione e realtà*, Milan 1960, pp. 154–59.

43 In the most famous of Ungaretti's poems, the object and subject are almost dispensed with, remaining as shadows and silence respectively, opening onto the universe, as in the tiny 'M'illumino / d'immenso' (I illuminate myself / with [the] immense). This is the kind of poem Antonio Gramsci had in mind when he called Ungaretti a 'buffoon of mediocre intelligence' who 'lumped words up against each other that don't always hold together even grammatically [...] and by technique and form [means] the vacuous jargon of a mindless coterie.' Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings* (tr. William Boelhower), David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (eds.), London, 1985, p. 334. Despite the understandable contempt of the political prisoner Gramsci for the poet who had had a preface written for him by Mussolini, he is right to identify Ungaretti's aiming towards vacuum and absence of reflection. What really irks Gramsci is less the aesthetic than its contrast with the fake populism in Ungaretti's metaliterary writings: 'Ungaretti has written that his comrades in the trenches, who were "common people", liked his poems, and it may be true: a particular kind of liking to do with the feeling that "difficult" (incomprehensible) poetry must be good and its author a great man precisely because he is detached from the people.' *Ibid*, pp. 272–73. Similar claims are often made for the populism of Hrabal, as, for example, in Exner, 'Nad lyrickými básněmi Bohumila Hrabala', p. 10.

44 See 'Dubnové idy', *SSBH* 14, p. 51. See also footnote 59 below.

45 Ungaretti, *L'Allegria*, p. 64, and Ungaretti, *Pohřbený přístav*. An English translation (of the Italian version) might read: 'The Clear Night // What song has risen tonight / to weave / the heart's crystal echo with/the stars // What feast has risen / from rejoicing heart // I have been / a pool of darkness // Now I bite / like a child at the nipple / at space // Now I am drunk with / universe.'

46 The Italian version: 'Word trembling / in the night / Leaf scarcely born' becomes in Czech: 'Word trembling / in [through?] / the night / like a leaf / scarcely born.'

47 '[...] la forte e scolpita semanticità della parola, estremamente disadorna', Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Un poeta e Dio' (1948–51) in *Passione e ideologia (1948–1958)*, Turin, 1985, pp. 309–26 (309–10).

48 'La parola in trasparenza, il sintagma volatilizzato in nuclei verbali senza peso', Pasolini, *Passione e ideologia*, p. 312.

49 *SSBH* 1, p. 136.

50 The results are the numerous very strong enjambements in Hrabal's poem (see also after lines 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18). 'La notte bella' has only one (*sono stato / uno stagno di buio*), a weak one at that. Hrabal's enjambements work against the weightlessness of isolated syntagmatic units.

51 The term is from Joseph Cary's reading of Ungaretti in *Three Modern Italian Poets: Saba, Ungaretti, Montale*, 2nd edition, Chicago and London, 1993, p. 156.

52 Hrabal, implausibly, also claims to have been inspired by Ungaretti's love for the city. In this case, he is surely using Ungaretti as a metonym for the whole of the Avant-garde.

- 53 In this context it is significant that these poems are so easily ‘transposed’ to prose. See Červenka, ‘Hrabal veršem’, for a full discussion of this, and see *SSBH* 5 for the results. As early as the 1939 collection *Dny a noci*, Hrabal had begun to re-work his short-lined free-verse poems (see, for example the short prose-poem ‘Chudobka’, *SSBH* 1, p. 41, and compare the short-lined free-verse version ‘Letní večer’, quoted in *SSBH* 1, p. 215, and printed in June 1938 in the Nymburk press; this versified version is otherwise almost identical). Červenka’s essay on Hrabal’s verse argues that ‘the facility with which Hrabal’s texts strip off their verse like an oversize shirt should not create the impression that the rhythm is a purely external cover, secondary to the character of the work.’ (Červenka, ‘Hrabal veršem’, p. 192.) Červenka stresses that even an unsupported free verse deforms a reading. While readings of Hrabal’s short-lined free verse are indeed informed by the line breaks, the regularity with which Hrabal transposes, and the method (he changes almost nothing but the verse structure), can be contrasted with Ungaretti. The famous short poem ‘Soldati’:

Si sta come	We are like
d'autunno	in autumn
sugli alberi	on the trees
le foglie	the leaves

shows up the difficulties in translating Ungaretti. The poet himself produced a version in what Joseph Cary called a ‘rough Alexandrine.’ (Cary, *Three Modern Italian Poets*, p. 163.) Actually, the translation is into prose: ‘Nous sommes telle en automne sur l’arbre la feuille.’ As isolation is removed from the leaves, the poem is flattened almost into nothing. Hrabal’s short lines, which serve to highlight signifier effects, can easily be turned into prose; Ungaretti’s, attempting to isolate symbols, cannot.

- 54 This is the core of Julia Kristeva’s argument in ‘Word, dialogue and novel’ (1967), in Toril Moi (ed.): *The Kristeva Reader*, Oxford, 1986: ‘Any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double,’ p. 37. Both Kristeva and Roland Barthes historicize this moment of linguistic doubling, placing it at the heart of a pre-Modernist crisis and identifying it particularly with the radical Symbolism of Mallarmé.
- 55 See, for example, Jan Mukařovský’s argument in ‘Předmluva k vydání Hlaváčkových Žalmů’, *Kapitoly z české poetiky II*, Prague, 1948, pp. 218–34.
- 56 See Cary, *Three Modern Italian Poets*, pp. 135–46.
- 57 ‘A hlavně že hodně čtu, a tak hodně cituju, a když hodně cituju, tak zapomínám říci, odkud a z koho to, co říkám, cituju. Jsem vlastně okrádač mrtvol a vylupovač vznešených sarkofágů. To je vlastně můj charakter a v tom jsem novátor a experimentátor, pořád šmíruju, kde se co dá od mrtvých i živých spisovatelů a malířů ukrást a potom jak liška zametající ocasem zahladit stopy, který by vedly na místo činu.’ *SSBH* 12, p. 224. The characterization of the writer as grave-robber stealing *from* the dead is an answer to Bloom’s characterization of the poet writing *to* dead poets.
- 58 ‘A kocovina odvála všechno, co jsem do toho rána věděl, a zůstalo mi prudce osvětlené... Nechte mne zde, jak nepotřebnou věc odhozenou do kouta...

Ungaretti... a potom Zen... Co je nejsvětější věc na světě? Mrtvá kočka... A proč? Protože už není k potřebě... A Laoc': Rovnati se svému prášku... a při odumírajícím těle být mimo nebezpečí...' *SSBH* 14, p. 51.

- 59 Ungaretti, *L'Allegria*, pp. 80–81. Stanza 3 reads: 'Lasciatemi così / come una / cosa / pasata / in un / angolo / e dimenticato.' Hrabal quotes from Adolf Felix's translation, 'Vánoce' in *Italští básníci 1900–1930*, Prague, 1922, p. 90. Transposing it into prose, Hrabal matches the poem's yearning for banality with an ostentatious banality of form.
- 60 Pasolini, 'Un poeta e Dio', p. 312. The antithetical term is the divine.
- 61 '[...] les auteurs sur lesquels on écrit et dont l'influence n'est ni extérieure ni antérieure à ce qu'on en dit, et (conception plus classique) les auteurs qu'on lit; mais ceux-là, qu'est-ce qui me vient d'eux? Une sorte de musique, une sonorité pensive... J'avais la tête pleine de Nietzsche... l'influence était purement prosodique.' Roland Barthes: *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Paris, 1975, p. 100.
- 62 See *SSBH* 12, pp. 265–66.

Bohumil Hrabal and the Corporeality of the Word

Zuzana Stolz-Hladká

*Scribere necesse est, vivere non est*¹

It is self-evident that speech and language are linked with the human body, since we have to refer to our body to perceive both ourselves and the world which surrounds us. In the experience of man, ‘body’ is given as his body — as a fragment of space.

It is through our body that we experience space and time. In the body’s coming into being, its transformations and demise we experience the immediate condition and the gradual progression of what we call reality. Thus it is through our body that we perceive the world, and we create our identity by means of and in relation to our body. The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty expresses it as follows:² ‘[...] we are in the world through our body [...] we perceive the world with our body. [...] the body is a natural ‘I’ and [acts as] the subject of perception.’³

To understand and express our experiences, to bring order to the chaos experienced inside and outside our body, we use language. And again this entails reference to the body: in thinking, speaking and writing we use our brain, mouth and fingers. The word depends in this way on the body and is intimately bound up with our lives as human beings.

Language in turn enables us to perceive and express ourselves as subject, and, here too, the subject which constitutes itself through language can only do so by reference to its body. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it: ‘[...] in the end the subject that I am is, taken in concrete terms, inseparable from the body [...] it is the body itself as a body-cognizant.’⁴ In this way, body and language are multiply linked, and consideration of one cannot but include aspects of the other.

The relation between body and language or body and word in the texts of Bohumil Hrabal — what I call ‘the corporeality of the word’ — will be the focal point of the following reflections. I shall not refer to certain aspects of this corporeality, for example, orality and its close link with the

body as opposed to literacy. However, by taking a closer look at some of Hrabal's texts, I shall attempt to show that the link between body and word, with its continual oscillation between matter (*material*) and spirit (*pneuma*), was an issue in which the author was interested throughout his work.

I begin with *Inzerát na dům, ve kterém už nechci bydlet* (Small ad for a house in which I no longer wish to live), a collection of texts written in the 1950s.

In 'Ingot a Ingoti' (Ingot and Ingots), one of the seven stories in this collection, Hrabal reflects on the transformation of bourgeois pre-Second World War (Czech) society into a new society, using to this end the metaphor of melting scrap metal down into new metal or steel. The story takes place in the scrap-yard of a foundry where metal scrap is collected, sorted, melted and cast into ingots, to create material for further transformation through melting and moulding. The process of transforming scrap material is transposed through the metaphor of an 'ingot', the intermediate product, to the workers themselves. The former petty-bourgeois *živnostníci* (small tradesmen) who are forced to work here are themselves called 'Ingots'; they are human material which has to undergo basic transformations in order to be remoulded. One of the story's protagonists, a doctor of philosophy, explains it to *živnostník Bárta* as follows:

Can't you understand that it's you yourselves loading all that tradesmen's junk of yours into the open-hearth furnaces, where ingots are being cast for another age? Where will all your businesses and crappy firms and instruments be a year from now? Gone. And what will have become of you? The same as of the means of expression you use... you'll be turned into ingots, you too will be forged anew by the times, because this isn't measles, it's the age.'⁵

The English word 'ingot' has two possible meanings. The older one is 'mould in which metal is cast', while the later one, which still applies, is 'mass of cast metal'.⁶ Borrowed into Czech, it has only the younger meaning.⁷ It could none the less have been intended by Hrabal to retain the connotation of the mould in which the metal is fashioned. In this context, the ingot-mould would then refer to the new society which provides a new shape for its ingots as it defines the new Communist man.

In addition, although the etymology of 'ingot' has no obvious or discovered association with 'God', Hrabal could well be playing on this association as well, seeing in 'ingot' a compound consisting of *in* and *Gott/God*, an 'incorporation' of God.

In the engineering strategy of the Stalinist era of the 1950s, a new Adam had to be created: not out of clay, like his biblical predecessor, but

out of steel mass. Having the biblical image of God's creation of the first man as a source, Hrabal also plays, in his imagery of creation through melting, on the fundamental difference between them. While God makes his creature a living one, breathing the spirit into it, endowing him with a mind and language, the 'ingots' and their 'means of expression' (Hrabal ironically describes the worldly goods of the old class as their 'means of expression' [*výrazové prostředky*]), have to be scrapped and cut up into pieces; after transformation, the substitute 'means of expression' which the new Ingots are offered is the brutish and obscene language of the foundry yard.

The difference of register between the signs and inscriptions that promoted the products and companies from the old world and the discourse of the people in the foundry yard undergoing the 'remoulding process' is striking. The passage containing advertising slogans (p. 56) is full of such diminutives as *vláček* 'little train', *baráček* 'small building', *župánek* '[dear little] dressing-gown' or *květinka* '[sweet] little flower', which help create a charming, if false idyllic world. Co-occurring with these diminutives we find such higher-style lexical items as *lid* (the people), *bída* (woe, misery), *uchvátit* (seize, enchant) and even the high-style imperative form *věz!* (know):

Věz, že čokoláda Ego chutná výborně.

(Be it known that Ego chocolate tastes excellent.)

Fafejtův Primeros dáme-li lidu, nepozná zklamání, nepozná bídu.

(If we give the people Fafejta's Primeros, they will know neither disappointment nor misery.)

[...] Srdce všech žen uchvátí župánek hedvábný, vyvátovaný, s dvojitou podšivkou.

[...] The hearts of all women will be enchanted by [our] [dear little] silk, quilted dressing-gown with double lining.

[...] Netrhej, nešlapej, květinka také cítí.

[...] Don't pick [it], don't trample [it], a flower also has feelings

(all p. 56)

This contrasts with the vocabulary employed by the foundry workers, who use such words as *žranice* 'grub', *kurva* 'whore', *jebat* 'fuck', *sračka* 'shit' or German-based slang words such as *švancmutter* 'prick-mother', i.e. 'brothel-keeper', *šajsfirma* 'shit-firm, crappy business' or *krajsfyzikus* 'regional doctor', all elements which typify the lowest version of Czech.

The concrete world of the people at the foundry, and its brutality, makes for a contrast which creates an aesthetics of ugliness and brutality in objects, acts and also language. Factory waste, machinery, tools, refuse and scrap metal of any kind seem to be another metaphor for the insides of the people working there. They are incapable of seeing the only woman on the site as anything but a whore. This traditional 'ingot' of theirs (in terms of a particular cultural tradition) is a girl who is perpetually drunk and is putting off serving a sentence in Pankrác prison. Like the processing of a metal ingot she is 'stripped' (a technical term in the metallurgical industry) from her 'mould' (that is, her clothes), to be offered for rape to the men present. Here again, as an echo of the breaking-up of metal scrap in the foundry yard, the girl's body is not shown as an entity, but as discrete parts. She is described first and foremost in terms of her blonde hair, which opens out like a fan of white peacock tail-feathers as she falls to the ground,⁸ shining in the glare of molten metal like pink candy-floss,⁹ or like a halo,¹⁰ or like milk spilling across the ground.¹¹ Princ, one of the protagonists, accordingly kneels down over her hair, not over her as a person: 'Prince knelt over that lovely hair, but as he bent over, he fell on his hands.'¹²

Further on the girl figures in the text mostly as pairs of white arms and legs: 'crosswise, two white arms and two legs stuck out'¹³ and 'two bare legs like two white fish.'¹⁴ The colour white, as consistently associated with the girl's body, especially when conjoined with the shape of the cross and the image of fish, has clear religious connotations.¹⁵ Towards the end of the story, where the girl's last fall, this time out of a window, is once more described in terms of crucifixion, the body is yet again displayed in terms of its parts:¹⁶

Such a strange fall it was, as if the girl was pierced by the axis of the window-frame, she fell turning on her axis as on a spit, head and trunk, while the legs rose up like two white ermine..., and when the trunk slipped down after the outspread hair, the legs slipped down too, as when the water swallows up a diver from the high diving board... and all that was left was the window-frame with tense, quivering stars.

The fact that we are dealing here not only with synecdoche is demonstrated by the following example, in which a part of the girl's body is presented in juxtaposition with an inanimate object, like a thing detached: '[the brigade worker] turned and sat down on the bunk, right next to a fireman's helmet and the white, girl's hand.'¹⁷

Parallels between fragmented objects and the fragmentary narrative technique of enumeration in the description of scrap lead to the conclusion that, in this story, language is being handled in the same way as the objects

that it presents. The stringing together of words with nothing but commas to separate them has its equivalent in the disjunctive portrayal of the girl through the parts of her body. By this device, the cruelty of what Hrabal calls the *epocha* 'era' is mirrored not only in the squalid and dilapidated background of the foundry and the behaviour and obscenities of the people, but also in the disjointed words, disjointed objects and the girl's disjointed body.

The parallels between words and the girl's body may reveal another biblical allusion with which Hrabal could be playing. The accumulation of religious detail (the cross, halo, the fish motif, the emphasis on the white colour connoting innocence, the crucifixion scene, but also the girl's refrain-like appeal to let her live¹⁸) all put one in mind of the core link between body and word in the Gospel of St John: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God' and 'the Word became Flesh'¹⁹ — a central passage in Christian exegesis understood as the 'mystery of God's incarnation'.

Hrabal's 'ingot' — possibly with the hidden pun 'in God' — is definitely portrayed in its 'fleshly' aspect. The girl as singular 'ingot' differs from the other 'ingots' in the story by her affiliation to this biblical reference. This 'ingot' probably refers to the 'Word become flesh' idea in St John's gospel, while the plural 'ingots' refer more to the creation of man in Genesis. This is sufficient to account for their separation in the story's title: 'Ingot a Ingoti'.²⁰ Both references are, however, linked to the theme of creation and materialization. Both have the word as their centre: the Biblical creation-myth repeatedly states that God created by word: 'And God *said*: Let there be light. And there was light' (Gen. 1, 3) and so on. Moreover, as might be more relevant to what follows below, both biblical images provide a point of departure for the myth of literary creation.

Any writing activity is an act of creation, with man in the role of creator: man creating worlds and creatures by word and out of words. In 'Ingot a Ingoti' Hrabal begins to develop what is undoubtedly to become one of his favourite themes: creation through words and the relation of body to word in the process. If 'Ingot a Ingoti' marks the beginning of his play with the metaphorical potential of the idea of creation, in *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too loud a solitude, 1976), a text written during the 1970s, he develops it to the full. Here he explicitly bases the text on the original parallel of body and word, focussing on the written word. The protagonist of *Příliš hlučná samota*, Hant'a, works in a waste-paper-processing plant, producing paper bales with his hydraulic press.

As in the earlier story, the scene is one of refuse undergoing an intermediate transformation before recycling or re-shaping. The basic material is paper, some of it packaging, but most of it paper covered in printed letters — books. Hant'a, the first-person narrator of the story, has been in his subterranean workplace for 35 years, and one of the first things he tells us about himself is that 'for thirty-five years I've been getting soiled with letters [...].'²¹ And to ensure that the parallel between the soiled body and the book with smudged ink become clear Hant'a continues: '[...] so I look like encyclopaedias.'²² Like compressed encyclopaedias, Hant'a's head contains compressed knowledge: much of his education has come from years of reading a wide range of works by philosophers and poets, rescued from the piles of waste paper.

Parallels between the body and books reappear throughout the text in many guises, each occurrence stressing a different aspect. At the beginning of the text, Hrabal confines himself to direct comparison: the hero not only resembles a book, but says: '[...] and I have a tangible sense that I too am a compressed bale of books [...].'²³ Soon thereafter the book–body comparison is elaborated in metaphors in which the book is a body and the body a book.

After ten years at his work, Hant'a himself diminishes in length, that is, he is compressed, by ten centimetres (p. 27). The reading process becomes a process of compression (p. 9), and Hant'a's brain a bundle of ideas compacted like a bale of old books (p.10). The metaphor of the human body — here especially the head — as a book culminates in the idea of a compressed, or crushed, head instead of a book from the press. The hero reflects:

[...] how much more beautiful must have been the times when all thinking was recorded only in the human memory; in those days, if anyone wanted to press books, he would have to compress human heads [...].²⁴

Here, in addition to referring obliquely to a period in Czechoslovakia's literary politics, the author is touching above all on the problem of orality and literacy — what is called 'primary orality'.²⁵ This relies not on written documents, but on memory and likewise includes combined reference to the body (orality) and the written word (literacy).

Elsewhere in the text, the book–body metaphor changes into a metaphor of the process of transformation: the metamorphosis of book into body. Here Hant'a does not read, but sucks the sentences which he finds beautiful out of books, savouring them as if they were a sweet, and drinking them in. They enter his bloodstream and, so transformed, become part of his body-matter:

When I read, it's not really reading: I take a lovely sentence into my beak and suck it like a sweet, as if I were sipping a glass of liqueur, slowly, until the thought disperses inside me like alcohol; it is slowly absorbed into me until it's not just in my brain and heart, but jangles through my veins right down to the vesicles of my arteries.²⁶

In this metaphor of the transformation of food into part of the body — or, in other terms, of mind into (body-)matter — Hrabal is preparing the ground for another of the meaning-laden metaphors upon which his text is built: that of the Eucharist and transubstantiation, originating in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of Matthew (Matth. 26, 26–28).

The author explicitly formulates this theme when barely a few sentences into the first chapter of the book. Again reflecting on the reading process, Hant'a explains the mystery of the word's becoming materialized and matter's becoming mind in the following terms:

When I get my eyes into a decent book, when I detach the printed words, no more is left of the book than immaterial ideas [...] because everything is air, just as blood is and simultaneously is not in the consecrated communion bread.²⁷

At this point the religious imagery still refers to the reading process; later on we find it used differently, but in a way that comes even closer to the religious meaning. Transubstantiation as traditionally repeated in the Roman Catholic Church is in the offering of the consecrated bread and wine, which, for believers, turn into the body and blood of Christ. The act of swallowing completes the process of God's materialization in the host and the host's dematerialization into God's Holy Spirit within the body of the receiver. Here the focus goes beyond simple materialization, moving closer to incarnation: not merely from thought to thing, but from thought to body.

In another realm of Hant'a's idea of books as bodies and bodies as books we find books described as having pages standing on end like hair, out of fear before being (com-)pressed.²⁸ As well they might, for 'as I pressed lovely books into bales in my hydraulic press, [...] I would hear the noise of bones being crushed'.²⁹

Although the entire apparatus of imagery and its implications appear right from the opening sentences of the text, it is only later that the reader appreciates the consequences for the intended readings. Hant'a's thoughts, all the texts he has ever read, his life and the town where he lives are all crammed into an apocalyptic press to be transformed into something else.³⁰ Hant'a's body follows the process of transformation of the books as they are compressed into bales; he almost becomes a book himself when he sits in the baler having pressed the start button. On the other hand, his attempted suicide also means he is entering the dematerializing process: he

is starting to enter another, immaterial world, to become a thought, to begin his spiritual existence:

I sat in the press, pressed the green button and curled up cosily in the trough, among the waste paper and a number of books, [...] and I began to enter a world where I had never been before.³¹

One might also read this metaphor in other ways. If we think of the writing process as part of the theme to which this imagery applies, the writer disappears as a person, but remains in the material world in the form of the written word, the text or the book, as Hrabal does and Hant'a would like to do. On the other hand, Hrabal may also be using this line of metaphor to express the fate of any written word. A text, as a compilation or collection of words that already exist, is a re-assemblage of waste paper, a re-packaging as a book. Undergoing the transformational process that is creative writing, it acquires a new shape as the author's text. In the reading process, it is transformed yet again from the written word into the thoughts that become the basis of future thoughts and future books, by which this endless process of metamorphosis through reshaping and dematerialising is continued *ad infinitum*.

Nothing has a final form; everything has to be transformed in order to be seen anew so that it can live on. It is now apparent that word-to-body and body-to-word transformations are just a part of the aesthetics of metamorphosis which Hrabal is pursuing and developing. In the following example, Hrabal transforms the Christian word-to-flesh metamorphosis into a general metamorphosis by associating it with Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. Hant'a tells us:

One morning, the butchers from the meat-processing plant brought me a truckload of bloodstained paper and blood-soaked cardboard boxes [...] and, so that the word should also be made bloody flesh, I placed an open copy of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* in the third bale.³²

In his *Ecce Homo* (1889), which contains the author's comments on his own work and life, Nietzsche inverts the creation myth of the Book of Genesis by explaining that the serpent under the tree was God, and that God changed from the perfect into Evil:

Theologically speaking — and pay heed here, since I rarely speak as a theologian — it was God himself who lay down at the end of the day's labour as a serpent under the tree: thus did he take a rest from being God ... He had made everything too beautiful... The Devil is merely God's idleness on every [on that] seventh day...³³

In this way, Nietzsche changes the biblical God into a God of metamorphosis, indeed into the very principle of metamorphosis.³⁴

Having compressed *Ecce Homo* together with the blood-soaked paper into one bale, this particular word turns not only into the historical flesh, Jesus Christ, but also into Lao-Tse. Hant'a expresses this a sentence later in the following terms:

And as I drank my fourth glass of beer, I saw a vision of a fair young man standing beside my press and I recognised at once that it was none other than Jesus. And next to him stood an old man with a crumpled face and I saw at once that it could be none other than Lao-Tse.³⁵

Like Nietzsche's rejection of the dualism of Good and Evil, as expressed in the metamorphosis by which God turns into the Serpent, the opposition between Hant'a's Jesus (a playboy, the embodiment of love, a spiral, *progressus ad futurum*) and Lao-Tse (an old man, the acme of emptiness, a circle, *regressus ad originem*) goes on to achieve a unity beyond this dualism. In Hant'a's own words: 'So the spiral and the circle correspond to one another in my job, and the *progressus ad futurum* merges with the *regressus ad originem*.'³⁶ Everything can be transformed into something else, even into its assumed opposite. This is, then, another formulation of the transformation of body into word or the material into the immaterial. Hrabal's aesthetics of transformation probably derive from Nietzsche. Combining it with Hegelian dialectic, he uses the metaphor as a device to express transposition, transformation and metamorphosis.³⁷

Hrabal's use of the Christian symbolism of the word become flesh continues an ancient scholarly tradition of theological and philosophical debate. The theological debate on the incarnation of the holy word and its equivalent, the philosophical debate on the materialisation of mind into word, are to be found in, for example, writings of the medieval theologian and philosopher (St) Bonaventure (thirteenth century). Bonaventure's conception of spatial and corporeal dimensionality in Holy Scripture provides further historical philosophical and theological background for Hrabal's metaphors based on bundles of printed papers. In the prologue to his *Breviloquium* Bonaventure expounds the notions of the 'breadth of Holy Scripture', the 'length', 'height', and 'depth of Holy Scripture' by reference to Ephesians 3, 18.³⁸

In addition to the Christian tradition, Hrabal also mentions the Jewish tradition of the written word of the Talmud. In the context of the earlier quotation in which compressed books sounded like crushed bones, Hant'a draws the following comparison:

[...] I heard the crushing of human bones, as if I were using a hand-mill to pulverise skulls and bones in the press of crushed classics, as if I were compressing sentences from the Talmud: We are like olives: only when we are crushed do we render up the best of ourselves.³⁹

And he is also referring to the Jewish exegetic tradition in Hant'a's words: 'So I worked as if I were shovelling a pile of lifeless clay/earth.'⁴⁰ He is actually describing Hant'a's desperate attempt to handle books like matter and not, as usual, like body — an image that only becomes clear when we appreciate that in the Talmud Adam (a 'golem', or matter that is formless until given life and language) remains a lifeless creation even after having been formed out of earth.⁴¹ Hrabal is here using 'earth' to render the idea of lifelessness, where in the Christian tradition 'stone' might be the more common image for a lifeless object.⁴²

It is interesting to note here that in the Jewish tradition God's written word is presented, in a conspicuously corporeal way, as a living body that should not be burned, but only buried; Hrabal might have encountered this idea in Jiří Weil's (1900–59) novel *Život s hvězdou* (Life with a Star, 1949). Weil is one of the authors whom Hrabal listed when asked to name people he had met and admired.⁴³ Weil's book is constructed around the idea of the concrete (material) 'living word', and in the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbala we also meet the idea of the creation of the world out of a combination of written letters.

Another probable source of Hrabal's idea of forging a living and concrete word is Viktor Shklovskii (1893–1984), to whom he often alludes in his autobiographical works.⁴⁴ Considering that the principle of transposition and transformation is the general principle in artistic creation, we are not surprised to learn that in *Prříliš hlučná samota* Hrabal formulates what could be called his artistic credo, a credo which underpins all the imagery which is discussed here and applies equally to other texts and their narrative procedures:

The only thing at which one can be horrified in this world is that which has calcified, the horror of paralysed dying forms, [...] the only thing at which one can rejoice is when not only the individual, but even human society is capable of rejuvenation through struggle, winning through new forms the right to a new life.⁴⁵

Hant'a's creative reshaping of waste paper along with reproductions of paintings, for example Cézannes and Rembrandts, that is, putting old things in new perspectives, reads as a fine metaphor for Hrabal's own creative activity of reshaping texts. Like Hant'a, Hrabal transforms reality into fiction while creating a work of art. Like Hant'a, he (com)presses life into paper and paper into life. One becomes the other and the distinction between a concept and its transposition, the original and its transformation, is obliterated.

In *Domáci úkoly z pilnosti* (Voluntary extra homework) Hrabal says that everything about which he has written he has also lived.⁴⁶ And in the

‘interview–novel’ *Klíčky na kapesníku* (Turns on a pocket-handkerchief) he says that he has only ever written about himself.⁴⁷ By transposing life into word and word into life he finally creates not only literature, but also his own life. He does what Nietzsche wrote in his introductory remarks to *Ecce Homo*: he tells his life to himself,⁴⁸ moulding it by his narration.

Elsewhere in *Klíčky na kapesníku* Hrabal formulates his technique of transposition by reference to the Prometheus legend: ‘I have always tried to steal the fire, to break prohibitions and create myself and my own work [...].’⁴⁹ Fiction and life are here made one. In creating both fiction and, through fiction, his own life Hrabal seems to have inverted the usual procedure of life transforming into fiction. Reality seems to follow fiction, or, as Květoslav Chvatík expresses it: ‘[...] the writer’s life is *subordinated* to literature.’⁵⁰

In the same interview (*Klíčky na kapesníku*) Hrabal concedes that, where his own life is concerned, fiction could anticipate reality, the written word informing him about his personal intentions. Put another way, the word’s place is in the origins of the future body, as in the Genesis myth:

In other words, it has only ever been through writing that I have learned what my essence actually was. With me it’s been a task ever since my teenage years right up until now; only after I’ve got the text down on paper do I ever find out, or discover *a posteriori*, all the things I’ve said about myself.⁵¹

In his ‘Kouzelná flétna’ (The magic flute, 1989), Hrabal speaks of reaching the peak of emptiness and wishing to commit suicide. He develops an entire literary genealogy of people who have jumped out of windows, or at least contemplated doing so, including some who jumped specifically from the fifth floor. His real and fictional examples include Franz Kafka, Malt Laurids Brigge, Reiner Maria Rilke and Konstantin Biebl; his own intention to jump from the fifth floor is described as postponed.⁵²

Once again, in this late text with the author’s reflections on his own death, Hrabal develops the metaphor of the word which becomes body. However, aware of the unending cycle where word becomes body and body word, he expressly elects to omit body-destroying desubstantiation. Referring to the death of Jan Palach, he writes:

[...] I would beg him [Jan Palach] on my knees to burn, but differently, to burn with a word that might become flesh [...]. But it came to pass. Lord, if you can, take this cup away from me. Christ did not want to be nailed to the cross. But in the end what came to pass came to pass [...].⁵³

And so it did. Hrabal did as he wrote and his word became body and so on — an endless cycle of metamorphosis.

Notes

- 1 Epigraph quoted after Vilém Flusser: *Die Schrift. Hat Schreiben Zukunft?* Frankfurt a. M., 1992, p. 6.
- 2 I am grateful to James Naughton of Oxford and David Short of London for having kindly provided the English translations of the quotations herein.
- 3 '[...] nous sommes au monde par notre corps, [...] nous percevons le monde avec notre corps. [...] le corps est un moi naturel et comme le sujet de la perception.' (M. Merleau-Ponty: *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, 1945, p. 239.)
- 4 '[...] finalement le sujet que je suis, concrètement pris, est inséparable de ce corps-ci [...] c'est le corps lui-même comme corps-connaissant.' (*Ibid.*, p. 467.)
- 5 'Copak nechápete, že všechny vaše živnostnický krámy si samy nakládáte do martinek, odkud se lijou ingoty pro jinačí epochu? Kde budou za rok ty všechny vaše živnosti a šajsfirmy a nástroje? Pryč. A co bude z vás? To samý, co z vašich výrazových prostředků... budou z vás ingoti, taky vás přetaví doba, protože to nejsou spalničky, ale epocha.' (p.55) All quotations from 'Ingot a Ingoti' come from the edition: Bohumil Hrabal: *Inzerát na dům, ve kterém už nechci bydlet*, Prague, 1965.
- 6 See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1989.
- 7 See *Akademický slovník cizích slov*, Prague, 1995.
- 8 '... její světlé vlasy se rozevřely jak paví chvost.' ('Ingot a ingoti', p. 44.)
- 9 '... dívčiny vlasy svítily jak růžová cukrová vata.' (*Ibid.*, p. 47.)
- 10 '... vlasy jak svatozář...' (*Ibid.*, p. 51.)
- 11 '... vlasy se jí rozlily jako mléko.' (*Ibid.*, p. 49.)
- 12 'Princ poklekl nad těmi krásnými vlasy, ale jak se naklonil, upadl na ruce.' (*Ibid.*, p. 45.)
- 13 '... do kříže trčely dvě bílé ruce a dvě nohy.' (*Ibid.*, p. 51.)
- 14 '... dvě nahé nohy jako dvě bílé ryby...' (*Ibid.*, p. 53.)
- 15 The *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 9, 1968, p.319, explains that 'fish' is a symbol among early Christian communities standing for Christ himself, but also for the newly baptised and for the Eucharist. It is frequently found co-occurring in religious art with bread and wine, symbols of the body and blood of Christ.
- 16 'Takový divný pád to byl, jako by ta dívka byla propíchnutá osou okenního rámu, kácela se jak na rožni kolem své osy, hlavou a trupem, zatímco nohy se zvedly jako dva bílí hranostajové..., a když se trup zasunul za rozpuštěnými vlasy, pak i ty nohy se zasunuly, jako pozře voda skokanku z vysoké věže... a zůstal jen okenní rám s napnutými třaslavými hvězdami.' ('Ingot a Ingoti', p. 55.)
- 17 '[brigádník] obrátil se a posadil na kavalec, hned vedle hasičské přilby a bílé dívčí ruky.' (*Ibid.*, p. 51.)
- 18 'Nechte mě žít!' (Let me live!).
- 19 John 1, 1 and 1, 14. All Bible passage are quoted here according to the *Authorised King James Version of the Holy Bible*, OUP.
- 20 The deliberate division and opposition between the two different kinds of ingots — the girl-ingot on one side and the men-ingots on the other — can also be found in Hrabal's own 1981 pictorial collage with the title 'Ingot a

ingoti'. Here a pale, bare woman's arm in the lower part of the picture contrasts with a collection of pieces of scrap iron, in dark colours, in the upper part of the picture. Two human bodies are also part of the scrap. The collage was published in Radko Pytlík: ... *a neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem. O Bohumilu Hrabalovi*. Prague, 1997, p. 24.

- 21 'třicet pět let se umazávám literami [...]' (*Příliš hlučná samota*, Prague, 1989, p. 9; all quotations are taken from this edition.)
- 22 '... takže se podobám naučným slovníkům...' (*Ibid.*, p. 9.)
- 23 '... a já mám hmatový pocit, že i já jsem slisovaný balík knížek ...' (*Ibid.*, p. 5.)
- 24 '... jak ještě krásnější musely být časy, kdy všechno myšlení bylo zapsáno jen v lidské paměti, tenkrát, kdyby někdo chtěl slisovat knihy, musel by presovat lidské hlavy ...' (*Ibid.*, p. 10.)
- 25 For a definition and discussion of 'primary orality' see Eric A. Havelock: *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*, New Haven, Conn., London, 1986.
- 26 'Já když čtu, tak vlastně nečtu, já si naberu do zobáčku krásnou větu a cucám ji jako bonbón, jako bych popíjel skleničku likéru tak dlouho, až ta myšlenka se ve mně rozplývá tak jako alkohol, tak dlouho se ve mně vstřebává, až je nejen v mém mozku a srdci, ale hrkáými žilami až do kořínků cév.' (*Příliš hlučná samota*, p. 9.)
- 27 'Když se očima dostávám do pořádný knihy, když odstráním tištěná slova, tak z textu nezůstane víc než nehmotné myšlenky [...] poněvadž všechno je vzduch, tak jako současně krev je a současně není ve svaté hostii.' (*Ibid.*, p. 10.)
- 28 'zděšené a hrůzou naježené stránky' (terrified pages bristling with dread). (*Ibid.*, p. 76.)
- 29 'Tenkrát, když jsem na svém hydraulickém lisu presoval krásné knihy, [...] slyšel jsem drcení lidských kostí.' (*Ibid.*, p. 21.)
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 93–94.
- 31 '... sedl jsem si do lisu, stiskl zelený knoflík a stočil se do pelíšku v korytě, uprostřed starého papíru a několika knih, [...] a začal jsem vstupovat do světa, ve kterém jsem ještě nikdy nebyl, [...]' (*Ibid.*, p. 105.)
- 32 'Jedno dopoledne mi přivezli řezníci z Masny nákladní auto plné krvavých papírů a zakrvacených kartonů [...] a do třetího balíku, aby i slovo bylo učiněno krvavým masem, jsem rozevřel Friedricha Nietzscheho *Ecce Homo*.' (*Ibid.*, p. 39.)
- 33 'Theologisch geredet — man höre zu, denn ich rede selten als Theologe — war es Gott selber, der sich als Schlange am Ende des Tagewerks unter dem Baum legte: er erholte sich so davon, Gott zu sein... Er hatte Alles zu schön gemacht... Der Teufel ist bloss der Müssiggang Gottes an jedem [jenem] siebenten Tage...' ('Jenseits von Gut und Böse', in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche: *Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, VI, 3, Berlin, 1969, p. 349.)
- 34 See the comments on *Ecce Homo* by Hans Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Frankfurt a. M., 1979, pp. 195–97.
- 35 'A když jsem pil čtvrtý džbán piva, zjevil se mi vedle mého presu líbezný mladík a já jsem hned poznal, že to není nikdo jiný než sám Ježíš. A vedle něj pak stál stařec s pomačkaným obličejem a já jsem hned shledal, že to nemůže být nikdo jiný než sám Lao-c'.' (*Příliš hlučná samota*, pp. 39–40.)

- 36 'Tak spirála a kruh si v mém zaměstnání odpovídají a progressus ad futurum splývá s regressem ad originem.' (*Ibid.*, p. 55.)
- 37 On Nietzsche's use and interpretation of metaphor see Sarah Kofman: *Nietzsche et la métaphore*, Paris, 1972. Kofman refers to a passage in Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht*, where the body is described in terms of the intellect and the intellect in terms of the body (Kofman, p. 45).
- 38 Bonaventure: *Breviloquium*, translated by E. Esser Nemmers, St Louis, London, 1947, pp. 3ff.
- 39 '... slyšel jsem drcení lidských kostí, jako bych na ručním mlýnku šrotoval lebky a kosti v lisu drcených klasiků, jako bych presoval věty talmudu: Jsme jako olivy, teprve když jsme drceni, vydáváme ze sebe to nejlepší.' (*Příliš hlučná samota*, p. 21.)
- 40 'Tak jsem pracoval, jako bych nakládal lopatou hromadu neživé hlíny.' (*Ibid.*, p. 81.)
- 41 See Gershom Scholem: 'Die Vorstellung vom Golem in ihren tellurischen und magischen Beziehungen', in his *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, Frankfurt a. M., 1973, pp. 209–59, especially pp. 211–12.
- 42 Earth as material and its use in the creation of Adam provides another link to the creation myth with which both texts ('Ingot a ingoti' and *Příliš hlučná samota*) are connected. Hant'a's action of shaping the bales has parallels with God's action of creating. And the red and green buttons on Hant'a's machine, which reappear in the red and green coloured dresses of gypsy women, could have an origin in, or be related to, the Kabbala tradition of initiation rituals. In one such ritual which does go back to the creation myth, the adept sees either a red or a green light. See Scholem, p. 183.
- 43 See Bohumil Hrabal: *Klíčky na kapesníku*, Prague, 1990, p. 87.
- 44 For example, in *Klíčky na kapesníku*, p. 32. Shklovskii's conception of 'living' as opposed to 'dead words' differs from Hrabal's use, but derives from the same metaphor of rebirth and transubstantiation. On Shklovskii's usage see his 'Voskresenie slova' (Resurrection of the word', 1914), reproduced in Russian and German in Wolf-Dieter Fink (ed.): *Texte der Russischen Formalisten*, II, Munich, 1972, pp. 2–17.
- 45 'Jediné, z čeho lze mít na světě hrůzu, je to, co zvápenatělo, hrůzu ze strnulých umírajících forem, [...] jediné, z čeho lze mít radost je to, když nejen jednotlivci, ale i lidská společnost se dovede bojem zmladit, vybojovat si novými formami právo na nový život.' (*Příliš hlučná samota*, p. 30.) Hrabal is referring here explicitly to Hegel as the source of his ideas, but similar thoughts could also be found in Nietzsche.
- 46 'Já aspoň jsem všechno, o čem jsem psal, žil nebo jsem se tak intenzivně vžil do toho, co se stalo těm druhým, že jsem s tím splynul...' [I have at least lived all of which I have written, or empathised so intensely with what befell others, that I merged with it...]. (*Domácí úkoly z pilnosti*, Prague, 1982, p. 142.)
- 47 On the subject of writing books he says: 'Mám před sebou text ve vzduchu, jsem nabitý jistými obavami, které hledají a pak nacházejí společného jmenovatele, a já to musím napsat. [...] Tak já se zabývám, je to vlastně luxus, že se zabývám jen sám se sebou, víte? Jen svými problémy, ale moje problémy jsou vlastně obecné. Já jsem uvaděč na společného jmenovatele.' (I have a text before me in the air, I am charged up with certain anxieties which seek and then find a common denominator, and then I have to write it down. [...])

So I am preoccupied — it's a luxury really that I'm preoccupied only with myself, you see. Only with my own problems, but my own problems are actually universal. I am one who brings these to a common denominator.) (*Klíčky na kapesníku*, Prague, 1990, p. 21.)

- 48 'Und so erzähle ich mir mein Leben.' (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 1969, p. 261.)
- 49 'Já jsem se vždycky snažil, abych ukradl ten oheň, abych přestoupil zákazy a vytvořil sebe sama a svoje dílo.' (*Klíčky na kapesníku*, p. 84.)
- 50 '... básníkův život byl *podřízen* literatuře.' (K. Chvatík: 'Dílo Bohumila Hrabala a problém postmoderny', in *Hrabaliana. Sborník prací k 75. narozeninám Bohumila Hrabala*. Prague, 1990, p. 115.)
- 51 'Čili já jsem se vlastně tím psaním vždycky teprve dovídal, co vlastně je má podstata. U mě je to úkol od těch jinošských let až dotedka, já vždycky, až teprve když mám text napsaný, tak potom z něho se dovím, čili a posteriori zjistím, co jsem tam všechno na sebe řekl.' (*Klíčky na kapesníku*, p. 28.)
- 52 See Bohumil Hrabal: 'Kouzelná flétna', in *Dopisy Dubence*, included in *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, 13, Prague, 1995, pp. 9–19, especially pp. 10, 14.
- 53 '... já bych jej [Jana Palacha] na kolenou prosil, aby hořel, ale jinak, aby hořel slovem, které by se mohlo stát tělem [...] Ale stalo se. Pane, můžeš-li, odevrat ode mne tento kalich. I Kristus nechtěl na kříž být vbit. Ale nakonec se stalo tak, jak se stalo' (*Ibid.*, p. 15.).

Hrabal and Boudník — a Fateful Friendship

Martin Pilař

I. Hrabal and Boudník as outsiders

This chapter deals with Hrabal as one of a pair of great outsiders in Czech literature, the other being his friend, the abstract artist Vladimír Boudník (1924–68). Hrabal often spoke of himself as an outsider, even after he had become one of the most popular Czech writers. The main circumstance of his ‘outsiderhood’ is when he is in the role of a silent witness; he saw himself as a shy man sitting quietly in the corner. In one of his numerous interviews he evokes the days of his youth:

I was forced into passivity, into listening, and in the end it became my dearest and most sought-after state, sitting silently and listening to people telling stories at home at the brewery, people such as draymen and itinerant journeymen-maltsters; I was an eavesdropping outsider. I have always had that passivity of the outsider.¹

In Hrabal’s case this is not to be understood as an expression of regret. He had concluded that as a silent spectator of the human *theatrum mundi* he would be less constrained than its actors. (This metaphor deliberately recalls the almost three years when Hrabal worked in the Libeň Theatre in Prague, but — and this is typical — as a scene-shifter and playing walk-on parts.) On the other hand, it is generally known that Hrabal, an intellectual and artist, had had numerous non-intellectual jobs, mostly among manual workers. This too amounted to actively playing-out, or rather living, a role. In *The Outsider* Colin Wilson says: ‘... the Outsider’s problems will not submit to mere thought; *they must be lived*’ (my italics).² As an outsider, Hrabal did not just *play*, but genuinely lived many of the roles usually expected from people of this kind. But he also lived certain roles which were not expected of him by his friends of the 1950s.

Unlike Egon Bondy (real name Zbyněk Fišer, b. 1930)³ and Ivo Vodsedálek (b. 1931),⁴ he did not become the type of ‘established outsider’ who refuses any form of collaboration with the regime.

Encouraged by Jiří Kolář (b. 1914)⁵ and Josef Hiršal (b. 1920)⁶ he agreed to publish part of his work officially. After his first book was published in 1963 and he had embarked on his career as a freelance writer, Hrabal rather paradoxically became ‘an outsider among outsiders’; some of his former friends and much younger readers might even use the word ‘insider’, if it existed in Czech. The rancour directed against him by the younger generation of the Czech literary underground culminated in 1976, after he broke his post-1968 silence in an interview for the Communist weekly *Tvorba* and after the appearance of *Postřižiny* (Cutting It Short, 1976): a group of young rockers led by I. M. Jirous-Magor (b. 1944)⁷ organized a strange sort of happening where Hrabal’s books were burned on a bonfire as if he were a sinner or even the devil.⁸ The double-outsider Hrabal sat in his corner, watching the *theatrum*, but his feelings on that occasion must have been more acute than those of any of his critics, for at the time he was in the process of finishing his outstanding *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too Loud a Solitude, 1980), whose protagonist Haňťa also witnesses the destruction of ‘innocent’ books. He must have felt strong and bitterly happy, because the manuscripts of *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* (I Served the King of England, 1980) and *Městečko, kde se zastavil čas* (The Little Town Where Time Stood Still, 1978), which rank among his best works, were still sitting in his drawer awaiting publication. Eventually they were published, first in the West, then much later at home. According to Tomáš Mazal,⁹ Hrabal’s younger friend and editor, Hrabal seems to be an outsider even after his death: ‘Appreciated, but at the same time also damned [especially after 1989], unclassifiable, praised abroad, but ignored by today’s representatives of the cultural and political scenes [with the honourable exception of the Minister of Culture] even on the day of his funeral.’¹⁰

Many readers of such Hrabal texts as *Něžný barbar* (The Tender Barbarian, 1981) or ‘Legenda o Egonu Bondym a Vladimírkovi’ (‘The Legend of Egon Bondy and Vladimírek’, 1967) may be led to think that Hrabal’s knowledge of Vladimír Boudník is of an almost intimate nature. But, as will transpire, there is a difference between what Boudník was really like and Hrabal’s portrayal of him. Hrabal, especially in texts written after Boudník’s suicide in 1968, created a semi-legendary picture of the man who had been his close friend since the early 1950s. The legendary Boudník is most visible in *Něžný barbar* (written in 1973), where Hrabal compares Vladimír with characters from the Christian and Jewish traditions so often that the reader may ultimately be left with the impression that he has not been reading about a real man, but about an individual of almost supernatural qualities. Even the narrative voice and the chaining

together of short episodes without an easily recognizable plot structure owe more to those traditional Czech fairy-tales which tell of the wanderings of Christ with St Peter around the world than to any of Hrabal's earlier texts. Thanks to this narrative posture, Hrabal gave shape to a posthumously created image of Boudník that may be vivid and attractive, but one that is actually short on truth. Boudník lives on in the memories of Hrabal's readers as an outsider who differs somewhat from the Hrabalesque passive witness. In a chapter on romantic outsiders, Colin Wilson offers a means to defining this type of outsider, writing that many of them realized themselves as *poets* or *saints*.¹¹ In numerous episodes of *Něžný barbar* Hrabal writes of Boudník as a man with extraordinary qualities and even as a saint capable of working miracles. He sees things not seen by others, for example, a burning cigarette-end in a pram containing a baby; or again, with a few deft movements, he saves a garage from being destroyed by a huge falling pine tree, though he has no experience of felling trees. Hrabal also describes him as a doer of good deeds. For example, in a scene where Vladimír helps a young mother with her work in the garden, he is depicted thus:

Vladimír would let his blond curly locks tumble down in the sun and the woman would run off to her child, sometimes baring her breast and giving the breast to the child. In the evening, Vladimír, as he said good-bye and insisted he would come back the next day, the woman conceived the notion that Christ was once more walking the Earth and she kissed the back of Vladimír's hand.¹²

There are countless other examples where Vladimír is compared not only to Christ, but also to priests of various churches, even to a Jewish rabbi; once he is indirectly compared to St Wenceslas and repeatedly to St Francis of Assisi.

It would be wrong to say that Hrabal paid no attention to other qualities of Boudník's character, such as his obsession with materials and with manual work, but his usage of Christian imagery is so striking that it cannot be simply overlooked. The vision of Boudník as a 'saintlike' outsider even influenced Jindřich Chalupecký (1910–90), the major art historian and author of the only published essay on Boudník (written 1984).¹³ He calls Boudník a 'missionary' (p. 9) and a few pages later he writes about Boudník's creative activity: 'It is apostleship; the apostleship not of a new art, but of a new humanity.'¹⁴

In Colin Wilson's study there is also a chapter entitled 'The Outsider as Visionary', devoted to George Fox and William Blake. Wilson writes of Blake that for him 'the vision of things as "infinite and holy" is not an abnormal vision, but the perfectly normal emotional state'.¹⁵ This recalls

Boudník's three manifestos of 'explosionalism' (written between 1948 and 1951), which were accompanied by numerous so-called 'street events' very similar to the happenings and performances of the 1960s. These manifestos describe, rather clumsily, the relation between human beings and the cosmos, but in them there are certain palpably visionary qualities. 'Explosionalism' is, frankly, difficult to define in a nutshell; suffice it to say that it sought to encapsulate, indeed emphasise, the cosmic dimension both of human creativity and of the most mundane of human activities.

While Hrabal lived most of his life as a silent outsider sitting in the corner and happiest in his solitude, Boudník wanted to be seen, heard and followed. He dreamed of opening the eyes of everyone he met and tried to communicate his vision of beauty to the crowds — not as a legendary 'saint' but as a down-to-earth 'visionary'.

II. Hrabal and Boudník: their texts

During the 1960s Boudník became an internationally renowned graphic artist, but his literary texts only reached the reading public posthumously, in 1993–94. His writings were published in one volume of literary remains and two volumes of correspondence. The former included short prose pieces and a selection from his diary called 'Jedna sedmina' (One Seventh). Previously, all these texts had been known only to a close circle of friends. Only after 1994 did it become possible to study the relationship between Hrabal and Boudník also from Boudník's perspective.

Boudník was not as well educated as Hrabal and Bondy; in both his diary and his letters he refers deferentially to Hrabal by the title 'Doctor'. What connected them most was their love of the Prague suburbs and modern art; what divided them was not only their education, but more generally their approach to understanding the world. Hrabal was profoundly interested in other people's wisdom and visions, whether revealed in the outpourings of a pub drunkard or in the writing of a Buddhist monk. Not only was Boudník not widely read, but he was not particularly pleased when Hrabal tried to fill the gaps in his knowledge of modern art. On the other hand, he himself felt that he was a visionary and was proud of his 'explosionalism', which expressed everything that he held important in life. In the mid-1940s Hrabal wrote his juvenile poems in the style of 'Neo-Poetism' (the other representative of that poetic movement being Karel Marysko);¹⁶ a few years later he met Egon Bondy and made friends among the then illegal (Prague) Surrealist group. Small wonder that Hrabal's flat in Libeň, which he shared with Boudník between 1950 and 1952, witnessed numerous quarrels. Boudník described one of

them in 'Noc' (Night, 1952). First he calls Hrabal and Bondy epigones of Surrealism and later adds:

You are inwardly dependent on Surrealism. [...] Poor you, because if you exclude Surrealism, you lose the impulse to do anything. You have nothing to lean on. Explosionism is a brick. There's no ignoring it.¹⁷

Boudník was well aware of Surrealism, but he refused to follow its ideas because he had his own artistic programme. It is probable that such quarrels helped Hrabal and Bondy to overcome their passion for Surrealism and to found their personal styles on what they called *Total Realism* (*totální realismus*). Hrabal's 1952 story 'Majitelka hutí' (The Steelworks Owner)¹⁸ was his first Total Realist text; it is much more akin to his later mature stories than most of his juvenile Surrealist efforts.

Hrabal was intimately acquainted with Boudník's diary written from August 1951 to June 1952; it is evident that it became a major source of inspiration for him, as can be seen from the following extracts:

Boudník:

We were walking. On Charles Bridge, near the plaque commemorating the casting down of St. John Nepomucene, I toss the sheet of painted art-paper down into the Vltava River. The editor sobbed: 'Why are you throwing it away? Such a waste!'¹⁹

Hrabal:

We were walking along Charles Bridge. Vladimírek tore the painted sheet of art-paper off his drawing board and threw it down into the Vltava right at the spot where a memorial cross marks where St John Nepomucene was hurled into the river. The sheet fell in a long, slow zigzag down onto the water's surface. [...] The journalist leaned over as if about to jump down after the floating picture. 'Why on earth did you throw it away? What do you think you're doing? Such a beautiful thing and you, downright irresponsible, you go and tip it in the river!'²⁰

Though these quotations are not very long, they are stylistically so typical of their respective authors that they permit of a few cautious generalizations. Boudník's description is non-metaphorical, using short sentences and is as concise as most of his diary. The extract is drawn from a longer text written with artistic ambitions, but its style is not radically different from the diary, the main function of which is to capture important moments and salvage them from oblivion. Boudník preferred reality to the verbal expression of it and he was always sceptical about the power of words. In graphic art he felt much more creative freedom and regularly complained that his verbal texts could not express all the tensions he felt.

The Hrabal version is more graphic; his longer sentences have their own melody and rhythm. Hrabal relishes the nuances of verbal expres-

sion and has the skill to play with them. He does not write to capture the fleeting moment, but to develop it and stress its beauty. One of the main ideas of Boudník's 'explosionalism' was the necessity of developing minimal stimuli to maximum effect. In his graphic art he indeed succeeded, while Hrabal succeeded in his writing. Hrabal's style is always infused with his Neo-Poetist and Surrealist past, but combined with his Total Realism. In his quarrels with Hrabal and Bondy, Boudník criticized Total Realism, but in fact he was very close to its ideas in most of his texts, including some of his correspondence. He also expressed a very pregnant, if somewhat ironical definition of Total Realism: 'So Total Realism equals: a highlighted Naturalist segment of environment X or Y, highlighted by the author.'²¹ Elsewhere he wrote: 'Total Realism reminds me of the form those three-line synopses of novels are written in.'²²

Now that Boudník's writings are available to the reading public, it is time to correct the common image of Boudník created by Hrabal after Boudník's premature death. We can now meet Boudník not only as the legendary character of many Hrabal texts, but as an original writer and thinker. It is now clear that Hrabal agreed with the main ideas of Boudník's explosionalism, even putting them into practice in his writing, and that he appreciated his friend's visionary qualities, read and admired Boudník's diary, short fiction and letters, and was directly inspired by them. On the other hand, Boudník wrote most intensively during the time when he shared Hrabal's flat. The main impulse for his writing was a friendly rivalry. Undoubtedly Boudník helped Hrabal and Bondy to overcome their close dependence on Surrealism, as manifest in their early texts, while they helped him to find his natural style in their theory of Total Realism.

It was a fruitful and a fateful friendship for both Hrabal and Boudník. In the late 1950s, and especially the 1960s, it was fractured, but not irredeemably damaged, by the artistic success which they each enjoyed and also by their meeting their respective future wives. They continued to meet from time to time and Boudník sent many letters to Hrabal, most of them very personal and some of them describing everyday episodes in a Total Realist style; one of them was written in Boudník's own blood. One of his last letters is particularly sad; it was written on 6th August 1968, just a few months before his suicide: 'On Sunday I came to visit you, but the house was locked. Recently the door has been locked for me too often.'²³

With Hrabal's own death they have been reunited.

Notes

- 1 'Byl jsem vnucen do pasivity, do naslouchání, a nakonec to byl můj nejmilejší a nejvyhledávanější stav, zticha sedět a naslouchat vyprávění u nás v pivovare, řeči kočich a krajánků, byl jsem naslouchající autsajdr. Vždycky jsem byl v autsajderský pasivitě.' Quoted in Susanne Roth(-ová): *Hlučná samota a hořké štěstí Bohumila Hrabala*, Prague, 1993, p. 106 (this edition is translated from German).
- 2 Colin Wilson: *The Outsider*, London, 1994, p. 70 (henceforth *The Outsider*).
- 3 Egon Bondy was a major author and organiser of the Czech literary underground in both the 1950s and 1970s. After 1989 he published his *Básnická díla* (Poetic works), in nine volumes and three separate collections of verse, 14 books of fiction, a six-volume history of philosophy and four volumes of philosophical essays. The bulk of Bondy's verse may be described as an open-ended poetic diary. His fiction is mostly historical, or anticipates the future in anti-utopian terms.
- 4 Ivo Vodsedálek, poet and manual labourer, was a leading figure of the 1950s underground, though his main productive period was in the 1970s. He did not publish until the 1990s. His early work was strongly influenced by Surrealism, but later he became a stark poet-reporter of the everyday. He founded the Prague Balloonists' Club in 1965 (proscribed in the early 1970s) and after the fall of socialism began running a travel agency.
- 5 The major experimental poet and graphic artist, and author of books for children, active since 1943. His prestige reaches far beyond his native land, not least of all because he lived abroad after 1978. Winner of several international prizes.
- 6 One of the most active spokesmen for the writers of experimental poetry. With Bohumila Grögerová he laid down the goals of a new poetics, which were to expose 'the degradation of language in both the public and literary spheres' and attack the 'sophisticated sentimentalization of certain already sentimental clichés and so hint at the relationship between literary kitsch and political violence'. (J. Hiršal and B. Grögerová: 'Doslov', in *Job Boj*, Prague, 1968, pp. 129–31.)
- 7 Ivan Martin Jirous (the agname and pseudonym Magor 'nutcase' comes from the title of several of his collections) is another of the leading lights of the 1970s and 1980s Czech underground. A poet and art historian, he was closely involved with the Plastic People of the Universe pop-group. He wrote his most highly regarded collection, *Magorovy labutí písně* (A nutcase's swan-songs, 1985; earned him the Tom Stoppard Prize), in prison having been convicted of 'sedition'; in the 1970s he had also done time for 'defamation of the nation' and later for allegedly 'offending public decency' (with some of his texts).
- 8 The event is recorded in Josef Vondruška: *A bůh hrál rock'n'roll* (And God played rock 'n' roll), Prague, 1992, pp. 75–77.
- 9 A journalist who has written widely in the press on aspects of or moments in Hrabal's life and work.
- 10 'Uznáván, ale i současně zatracován (zvláště pak po roce 1989), nezařaditelný, sklízějící aplaus v zahraničí, ale ignorován dnešními představiteli kultury i politiky (s čestnou výjimkou ministra kultury) i v den pohřbu.' ('Buddha na

třínohém koni', *Právo*, 15 March, 1997.) The culture minister concerned was Jaromír Talíř, a decent and conscientious bureaucrat, not directly active in any cultural field; he served for about one year only.

- 11 *The Outsider*, p. 59.
- 12 'Vladimír nechával přepadat do slunce ty svoje blondáté kučery a ta ženská odbíhala k dítěti, někdy vytáhla prs a dala dítěti prs. Navečer Vladimír, když se loučil a vymíňoval si, že zítra přijde zase, ta ženská vymyslela, že zase chodí po zemi Kristus a políbila Vladimírovi hřbet ruky...' (*Něžný barbar*, Prague, 1990, p. 39.)
- 13 'Příběh Vladimíra Boudníka', in Jindřich Chalupecký: *Na hranicích umění*, Munich, 1987, pp. 7–26. Chalupecký was a theorist and historian of both art and literature, with a prevailing interest in all branches of the avant-garde and the oddballs of the artistic fringes.
- 14 'Je to apoštolát; apoštolát nikoliv nového umění, ale nového lidství', *ibid.* p. 15.
- 15 *The Outsider*, p. 231.
- 16 Karel Marysko (1915–88) was one of Hrabal's closest lifelong friends and a cellist with the orchestra of the National Theatre in Prague.
- 17 'Jste na surrealismu vnitřně závislí. (...) Jste chudáci, jelikož při vyloučení surrealismu ztrácíte podněty něco dělat. Nemůžete se o nic opřít. Explosionismus je cihlou. S ním se musí počítat.' ('Noc', in *Z literární pozůstalosti*, Prague, 1993, p. 8.)
- 18 This work was also known, both earlier and later, under the name 'Jarmilka', the text of which was found in Karel Marysko's locker.
- 19 'Šli jsme. Na Karlově mostě, v blízkosti pamětní desky, připomínající svržení sv. Jana Nepomuckého, přehazují pomalovanou čtvrtku papíru do Vltavy. Redaktor zavzlykal: "Proč to vyhazujete? je to škoda!".' (*Z literární pozůstalosti*, p. 20.)
- 20 'Kráčeli jsme po Karlově mostě. Vladimírek strhl z desky pomalovanou čtvrtku a hodil ji do Vltavy právě v těch místech, kde je kříž na památku, kde byl do řeky svržen Jan Nepomucký. Čtvrtka cik cak zvolna a dlouho padala na hladinu. (...) Novinář se nakláněl, jako by chtěl skočit za plovoucím obrazem. "Proč jste to, člověče, zahodil! Co to jen děláte! Takovou krásu, a vy jste ji, vy jeden nezodpovědný člověče, vysypal do řeky!".' ('Legenda o Egonu Bondym a Vladimírkovi', in *Morytáty a legendy*, Prague, 1968, p. 27.)
- 21 'Totální realismus rovná se tedy: podtržený naturalistický výsek z XY prostředí, podtržený tvůrcem.' (*Z literární pozůstalosti*, p. 36.)
- 22 'Totální realismus mně připomíná formu, jíž jsou psány obsahy románů na třech řádcích.' (*Ibid.* p. 58.)
- 23 V neděli jsem Vás šel navštívit, ale byl zamknutý dům. Poslední dobou jsou pro mne dveře zamknuté příliš často.' (*Z korespondence II (1957–1968)*, p. 92.)

Fun and Games with Montage: the Individual Case of Hrabal's *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*

David Short

[Hrabal] Považuje zřejmě všechny sbírky
textů za jistý druh montáže či koláže.

Miloslava Slavičková

The subject of this paper is the first version of a work that is in many senses unique in Hrabal's oeuvre, namely the assemblage of words and pictures that is his *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*.¹ The discussion is based on quotations from a variety of sources to show that there are senses in which it is, on the contrary, a typical, if not quintessential, Hrabal work. The later version, in reality a derived, new work, 'Legenda zahraná na strunách napjatých mezi kolébkou a rakví',² is not discussed, since much of what is said below applies equally to both. In any case a detailed study of the formal and functional differences between them has been ably produced by Miloslava Slavičková.³

The book consists of photographs and textual extracts from a variety of different sources. Neither the photographs nor the texts are Hrabal's own. The former are by Miroslav Peterka and the latter from five different and disparate sources. In the author's words the book's aim is to

... attempt to express the polyhedral quality of this stylistic discordance [that is, the external features of Prague] through the horizontal flow of living speech, registering in snatches the roar of streets and of noisy secluded spots, the rear-view mirrors of ancient legends, Czech humour in the statements recorded in documents from magistrates' courts, the oriental mystery of the fate of chessmen, which are yet those of men, and the statuarial poetry of the verticals of saints and their attributes that adorn the city. Through the arhythmical alternation of these five motifs, discordant sentences establish necessary friendships with one another, just like all the things and all the people gathered up and bundled together in this huge sheet that is the city.⁴

I begin with a quotation from Štěpán Vlašín:

In his prose works of the early 1960s Hrabal worked by the method of contrasts and montage, juxtaposing the motifs of beauty and ugliness, life and death, brutality and tenderness. The point of view was not satirical, but grotesquely lyrical.

In the second half of the 1960s, Hrabal published several books which were dominated by scepticism, black humour, a delight in life's paradoxes, and a naturalist transcription of the cruelty of life: *Inzerát na dům, ve kterém už nechci bydlet* (1965), *Toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel* (texts to accompany photographs by Miroslav Peterka, 1967), *Morytáty a legendy* (1968).⁵

Until the 1990s, this is one of the (relatively) few comments in general critical writing on Hrabal to mention *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel* (albeit misquoted with a capital T). The reason is perhaps in the gloss: the book is not the work of Hrabal alone.⁶ The same passage is, however, one of many to mention the writer's method as based (heavily and consistently) on contrast and montage. These are, if anything, the 'given' of Hrabal's work, and it is this aspect which focussed the attention of Slavíčková in particular, in 1977 and 1980,⁷ and more recently Milan Jankovič.⁸ Slavíčková's essays illustrate, among other things, the ambiguity and overlap of the terms *montage* and *collage* as applied to Hrabal.⁹ It is not the purpose here to develop the opposition further; I merely adopt 'montage' for juggled, obviously 'assembled' and 'reassembled' linear text and 'collage' for the more obviously 'artistic' overlay of non-textual devices. Slavíčková prefers, initially with some hesitation, to describe the work as collage.¹⁰ My own preference for 'montage' is based not only on Hrabal's own use of the term, perhaps as the more general of the two terms, but on the grounds that he, having adopted material (here the textual extracts) from various other parties in a manner analogous to the birth of many of his narrative works, makes them his own. The *zapisovatel* (recorder), as he often described himself, becomes as he assembles, 'mounts' the pieces into a new work, the *spisovatel* (writer) that the rest of the world sees and reads.

Hrabal himself speaks retrospectively of the montage aspect of his work generally when he says:

And so, as I cut myself off from my past, those scissors did stay in my fingers and I began to use them after writing the texts, when I began to use the "Cutter" technique on the text as on a film. [...] And so in those days I wrote with scissors in my fingers, indeed I only wrote in anticipation of the moment when I could cut the written text up and combine it into something that would astonish me in the way a film does. [...] Nowadays I can indulge in the luxury of writing *alla prima*, using the scissors as little as possible...¹¹

While Hrabal may, in later years, have abandoned the micro-use of scissors in his assembling and re-assembling of text to create individual works, similar macro-processes were nevertheless at work in the jumbling and

reorganizing of ready works into later publications. Many later works consist precisely of variously amended versions of earlier works, or even their parts, but in new combinations, and with one or other becoming the titular piece in the new arrangement. This quirky pattern of recycling, compounded by the chequered publication history of many works, gave rise to the serious prognosis that 'Editors of any future *Collected Works* of B. Hrabal will have the unenviable task of identifying the definitive, authentic form of the majority of Hrabal's texts'.¹²

The quotation above from 'Proč píšu?' contains one of many references, in Hrabal and in his commentators, to film and the montage-like work that film-editing is.¹³ It is not without interest that several of Hrabal's works have themselves been filmed.

Somewhere between the film and the book of printed consecutive prose stands a work like *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*, explicitly a montage, as we learn from the gloss in brackets on the first (only) of two title pages (Illustration 1, p. 75).¹⁴ The book is produced (in part) by a camera (which 'cannot lie'); the photographs used could be assembled by the author in whatever order is required, yet, unlike a film (and, more or less, even consecutive narrative), the reader can also metaphorically reassemble it however he likes — by dipping or page-hopping. The reader is perhaps directly encouraged to do so, given the author's note that precedes the first page of text proper; this indicates the sources of the text and says that it is 'put together loosely' (*sestaven volně* [Hrabal's underlining]; Illustration 2, p. 76). Moreover, neither the photographs, nor the extracts, nor even the pages are numbered.

Critics also point out the contribution to Hrabal's method of other non-literary art forms beside film:

These authentic protocols were later enriched by Hrabal, now as a recognised author, using the technique of collage and montage, in which he had learned from the technique of film and *representational art*.¹⁵ (My italics.)

Hrabal himself is highly conscious of art, and the untitled 'foreword' to *toto město...* makes plain his inspirational debt to the Surrealists in particular. Slavičková devotes two pages to Hrabal and art, including a couple of key quotations from *Domácí úkoly z pilnosti* (Voluntary extra homework).¹⁶

The use of the word 'protocol' in the previous quotation is important: while here it is second-hand, being used by Hrabal of the sources of some of his earliest works,¹⁷ it is none the less instructive. Its primary meaning is a 'record' in some kind, exactly what a series of photographs is. The

photographs in *toto město...* are a record of a place as viewed through the non-verbal prism of another, Miroslav Peterka.

The place is, moreover, lived in. Its buildings are the ‘characters’ who are present, the indifferent *obyvatelé* (inhabitants) are characters who are (often) absent, in the wings somewhere. Such foregrounding of buildings over people is something that crops up throughout Hrabal’s work: we think of the physical description of the brewery that figures in *Postřižiny* (Cutting it Short) and elsewhere, so vividly captured in the film version of the same. This aspect of Hrabal’s texts is described by Jan Schneider:

In the text [of *Svatby v domě* (Weddings in the house), 1986] a major role is assigned to the precise characterization of the place where the various episodes take place: a central, almost magical, role is played by, above all, the tenement block in Na hrázi Street.¹⁸

In a variety of ways, then, as these quotations — each about different works — have shown, *toto město...* is, perhaps surprisingly, typical of Hrabal. On the other hand it is an atypical work. One trivial detail is that, unlike the majority of Hrabal’s other works, it saw only one edition, in 1967, for which there may have been political, more than technical or literary reasons.¹⁹

More important is the matter of co-authorship, in which respect the book is unusual.²⁰ However, just as it was remarked by Frynta (Note 13) that Hrabal’s prose is a montage of observed fragments of other people’s dialogue (though in his narrative prose-works Hrabal has no reason to acknowledge individual ‘sources’ as contributing authors), so *toto město...* is, in part, a montage of someone else’s camera fragments. Also comparable to, but different from, the montage that goes into purely narrative prose is the textual apparatus of *toto město...* It is not only, like the photos, ‘put together loosely’, but consists entirely of fragments from other sources, but nothing directly from the author’s own pen. The sources are: *Attribute der Heiligen*, Popelka Biliánová’s (1862–1941) *Pražské tajnosti*,²¹ *Mysterium der Schachkunst*, transcriptions of court proceedings (other people’s ‘protocols’ of things said), and snatches of conversation overheard in the street (Hrabal’s own ‘protocols’). The latter are reproduced presumably verbatim, and therefore without the same creative filter through which similar inspirational matter is processed in more obviously ‘literary’ works. Quotations from the two anonymous German sources are given in Czech. Slavíčková (‘Některá pozorování...’) suggests that, just as there are minor adjustments in Hrabal’s reproduction of the verifiable sources, making them less than one hundred percent authentic, it is conceivable that he adjusted here and there the wording of the non-verifiable sources. I suggest one possible occurrence of this below.

Other surface features which contribute to both the montage effect and the generally Hrabalesque ‘artistic’ qualities of the book are:

- the use of alternating type-faces and typographical layouts;
- the non-use of capitalization in either the title or the sentence introducing the sources;
- the vertical sheering of the title, leaving only the left-hand half, on the book’s spine, to give the fanciful *toto je spol oby* (Illustration 3, p. 77; this is perhaps interpretable as a kind of Slavonic ‘lingua franca’ to mean ‘this is half of both’ — and note the finger pointing directly to it);
- the collage layout of the list of sources, in which each line of text is tilted at a different angle (see p. 76);
- the absence of the normal structural indicators in a book, that is, absence of pagination, as mentioned, and even the fact that the only piece from Hrabal’s pen has no heading;
- the fact that that ‘foreword’ is printed on pages that are usually blank in a normally structured book.

Let us look now at some other critical comments on Hrabal and seek to relate them to *toto město...* For example, Jan Schneider writes:

Transformed by Hrabal’s surrealistically bizarre celebration of the everyday, episodes from his colourful career appear, albeit in varying degree, in almost all his works (*Inzerát na dům, ve kterém už nechci bydlet*, 1965; *Postřižiny*, 1974, 1976; *Krasosmutnění*, 1979, and others).²³

The degree to which this autobiographical input is literally present also in *toto město...* is relatively modest, but is still to be found. Hrabal, like anyone living in Prague at the time, had first-hand (and ‘first-eye’) experience both of the visual details captured by Peterka’s camera, and, in all likelihood, of the certain unfortunate ‘things people say’ under stress, which were reproduced in his day under the rubric ‘Ze soudních síní a předsíní’ (From courtroom and corridor) of the would-be satirical weekly *Dikobraz*; this rubric carried, perhaps not without a little *Schadenfreude*, authentic utterances made from the witness stand, in which the speakers (police and other witnesses, and the accused) committed a wide range of grammatical, syntactic, semantic and/or logical infelicities. *Dikobraz* reprinted them purely for their comic effect, without the need for any further comment; Hrabal puts them to more constructive use, reassembling them (perhaps a little less ‘loosely’ than claimed) in the montage commentary on life that is the text of *toto město...* The ‘surrealistically bizarre transformation’ is in their juxtaposition with the excerpts from the other sources used (artificially created ‘wondrous encounters’). And their

‘everyday’ quality is in the subject matter: family relationships, sexual intimacy, domestic mishaps, cooking and work are the substance of the items incorporated in the first page of text alone. Like the snatches of conversation overheard in the street (often containing the same kind of linguistic and logical peculiarities), they serve to set the tone — that this is about real people and their lives — much as the first photograph used (certainly not placed first accidentally) underpins the whole idea of the book.

That photograph (Illustration 4, p. 78) is dominated by a sculpture of a naked female lying on a towel sunbathing. This is by nature a horizontal image, but it is mounted vertically for decoration on the wall of a building. In other words, the city fathers (or whoever commissioned this particular piece of artwork) successfully merged the horizontal and vertical dimensions which Susanne Roth finds Hrabal exploiting actively in *Mrtvomat*, the precursor of *toto město...*²⁴ The effect is further enhanced in that below the sunbather, at street level, but forming the bottom edge of Peterka’s photograph, is a sign, familiar from all over Czechoslovakia under socialism, reading: *Tento dům je ve společné péči kolektivu nájemníků* (This building is in the joint care of the collective of tenants).²⁵ In effect, the two items together, the sunbather and the notice, constitute an unconsciously grotesque, unwitting micro-montage (‘wondrous encounter’) *sui generis*. It is small wonder that it inspired Hrabal, master of the literary montage, to take the idea up for a macro-version of the same, transforming, in the title of the book, the ‘house’ of the notice to the city, and the ‘tenants’ to the population in general.

Writing of *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Closely observed trains), Radko Pytlík says:

Besides the montage-like contrast between the two lines of the action, what is remarkable is the way in which they are poetically interwoven. The story seems quite seamless, as if the two lines were not merely complementary, but there to enrich each other with signification. Elements of the fantastical and of picturesquely material, authentic detail act in confrontation; punch-lines charged with irony are given a final touch by the easy, flowing intonation of Hrabal’s style. The ludicrous quality of the banal is tragic. The basis of this tragedy is not some metaphysical problem, but ordinary everyday life. Everything depends on how we apprehend the many forms and situations which Life puts in our way.²⁶

Had he been writing about *toto město...* Pytlík could not have made the point more fittingly. However, here the poetical interweaving is not between two lines of narrative, but between the photographs and the printed text (and among the five sources of the latter). Any ‘elements of the fantastical’ are concentrated in the selected quotations. They include in

particular the distinctly bizarre language of the book on the Art of Chess: 'Now he gets into causal dire straits. It is the black bishop's last chance',²⁷ or: 'Such grand optics is necessarily a challenge to Destiny. It sees the distant entrammelling of things';²⁸ 'Now comes the crisis, the bishop approaches, but is afflicted by a twofold paralysis';²⁹ and the appropriately near-vertically laid out 'attributes of the saints' (note that saints in representational art are almost invariably portrayed erect, that is, vertically):

Holding a wrenched-out tooth in tongs,
or when she has just had it knocked out by chisel or mallet.
Patroness against the toothache.
Apollonia.³⁰

or:

A hermit.
Three hinds.
A pot.
A hat or cape hung on a sunbeam.
A devil on his back.
Goar.³¹

As for the ludicrous quality of the banal (not, however, 'tragic' in *toto město...*), the courtroom testimonies are a bottomless well of interwoven reality (the facts of a given case) and the verbal account of it:

The behaviour and comportment of the accused are impeccable, wherefore it may be said that he has a positive attitude to the system. However, this can only be asserted insofar as he is in a state of sobriety.³²

or:

Then we were sitting outside the canteen on some pieces of timber and planks. In the prison I was in charge of the greenhouse. I said to one of the guards: 'I could make good use of this 'ere piece of timber.' But 'e started yellin': 'Don't you even dream of it, woman. It's a dismantled scaffold!'³³

or:

To the unsuspecting he said: 'You eunuch of a head of beef!' And when I enquired: 'I beg your pardon?', he added: 'Your ear-lobe contains the end-product of the metamorphosis of comestibles.' When I had this translated, I was horrified. So I'm suing.³⁴

or:

The accused is a young man of respectable appearance, of the American type, whereas the witness is 14 years older than he, an unprepossessing, haggard woman, prematurely past her best. Only something syrupy about the accused enables these obstacles to be overcome.³⁵

The same kind of utterances retrieved from 'ordinary everyday life' is of a similar order, but without the 'official' dimension; occasionally they contain signs of deliberate invention on the speaker's part, rather than merely unfortunate expression:

You are like a landscape after rain. Soaked and bursting.³⁶

or:

My hearing's so good that if I were a police dog, I'd be given the best grub.³⁷

In both court and street utterances, most of their bizarre, in fact grotesque, quality comes in the logical or semantic distortions which they contain, as in:

I was riding my motor-cycle without a driving licence because I don't know the way by train.³⁸

or:

The father of the accused was a worker. He died when he was nine years old.³⁹

or:

I have a son who is six weeks old, which is why he isn't employed anywhere.⁴⁰

or:

She has rheumatism and one child, which is the consequence of living in a damp flat.⁴¹

or:

I was on my way to work as usual and whereby I fell pregnant.⁴²

or:

The class origin of S. Holoubek is not in Prague, for he came to Prague in 1951. The person in question is a widower, since he's divorced and living in a conjugal manner with M. Krasavová, a widow who is likewise divorced.⁴³

To the extent that Hrabal did not need (or did not apparently need) to manipulate the pearls which his 'indiscriminate attention'⁴⁴ revealed — in this book as in many others — we are led to accept their authenticity at face value. However, the names of the individuals in the last quotation are almost too good to be true: the speaker's confusion of the two unmarried states of widowhood and divorce is so distracting in its comic effect that we barely even register the telling surnames of the enamoured pair (*holoubek* 'sweetheart', *krásava* [usually *krasava*] 'a beauty'). Another similar verbal 'sliver of life' (*střípek života*, as such snippets anywhere in Hrabal are described by Jankovič and others) is the following:

Mr and Mrs Konipásek often commit immoral acts in the house, consisting in the fact that they often fight in public and also swear at each other with words that are often employed by small children. To crown it all, when Miroslav Konipásek's wife can achieve nothing by her eloquence, she lifts her skirts, revealing her bare bottom and her sexual organ.⁴⁵

If not carried away by the grotesque juxtaposition of verbal 'eloquence' and the eloquent gesture of exhibiting the buttocks, and if not held up by wondering just which juvenile vulgarisms the speaker might have meant,

the reader could easily miss the almost lost telling surname of the miscreants. One might even wonder whether Hrabal himself appreciated that *konipásek* 'wagtail' (the bird) has a (grammatically feminine!) synonym *třasořitka*, literally 'wag-arse', or whether, on the contrary, fully aware of the synonymy, he perhaps even deliberately selected the (genuine Czech) surname Konipásek in lieu of some less interesting one.

In either event we might see him here at his *pábitelský* best, since:

[the *pábitel*] looks for poetry in everyday reality..., he defends himself against uglified phraseology and the mannerism of forms of communication. He amuses us and seizes our attention with his entirely fresh, unhackneyed way of seeing things.⁴⁶

Those who have written previously about *toto město...* have generally concentrated on the method, that is the montage (or collage) of fragments from five sources to create an original semantics and aesthetics arising from the unpredictable juxtapositions. I would maintain that both on the grounds of Hrabal's affinity with representational art and on the grounds that even when writing he makes us see so many things afresh, the proper number is not five, but six; Peterka's photographs are no less part of the book's working apparatus than the written word. Nor are they treated any differently, beyond perhaps the exigencies of the printing and binding processes.

The photographs are of the same status as the verbal fragments, being used by Hrabal second-hand. Their distinctive formal quality, as pictures, not words *per se*, perhaps explains why the other five types of excerpts are also distinguished formally, by their layout as new paragraphs (and by partial variation of fonts), in contrast to the fluid merging of analogous material in 'Legenda zahraniá na strunách...' ⁴⁷ and elsewhere.

In addition, and as has apparently not been noted in print, a large proportion of the photographs do contain text. Furthermore, those textual contributions are a mixture of the public and verifiable (like the excerpts from published works) and the naive, usually graffiti (comparable, then, to the witness statements and the snatches overheard in the street). The vast majority are in the spirit of 'wondrous encounters', caught by the camera's quasi-indiscriminate attention. Many contain their own types of semantic and even linguistic infelicity. They are, by their nature, more awkward to discuss, since they have to be described, rather than quoted.

The second and third photographs, printed on facing pages (Illustration 5, p. 79), are of a photographer's display window and a then familiar type of Czech post-war pram. The former has the heading *Dětská reportáž* (that is, the shop has a special service for taking children's photos). Beneath that is the legend *Vyvoláváme* (another

service is developing), and below that is a sample of the shop's work — with not a child in sight, but several posed 'model' adult citizens. Given the broader semantics of the verb *vyvolávat*, it is tempting to see this as an image of a political system to which the Jesuitical moulding of infants into model adults was by no means alien. The pram on the opposite photograph is standing (apparently) empty outside a different shop, which carries the one-word legend *Fantazie* (Imagination). This we might interpret as an antithesis; we can only guess, fantasise, about what each and any child might grow into 'naturally'.

A good example of odd juxtaposition ('wondrous encounter') is the street-name *Kanovnická* (Cannon St.), with above it, drying in a half-open window, a line of socks and long johns. Another street-name, *Divadelní* (Theatre St.), with its obvious 'visual' connotations, has adjacent to it the road-sign indicating a cul-de-sac, namely *Slepá ulice*, or 'blind' alley, the very antithesis of the visual. The photograph opposite this one is of the head of a statue in the mask of Tragedy (Illustration 6, p. 80). It is not only detached from any body (and so powerless to affect), it is lying bottom left, on its crown, so we see its grimace ironically reversed (corners up, as for Comedy). This strong image of the powerlessness, or thwarted power, of theatre as art in socialist Czechoslovakia is enhanced by the adjacent symbols of a more mechanical power: some flex, a power-drill and a three-gang extension lead. And in the top right-hand corner of the photograph, on the base of a pillar, we can see two-thirds of an heraldic shield carrying the two-tailed Bohemian, or Czech, lion. The bit which we — crucially — cannot see (cut off by the edge of the picture) is the lion's head.

Art and technology again come together in inharmonious juxtaposition in the shape of two metal plates on a wall in another photograph. One indicates that the building houses a self-service ironmonger's, the other that Božena Němcová wrote *Babička* (The Grandmother, the Czech classic novel) there in 1854.

Many of the photographs are more casually whimsical, such as the sign at a car-park indicating, with the standard legend *Hlídané parkoviště*, that there is an attendant. The inference of care and concern for the parked vehicles, carried in the verb *hlídat* 'guard, watch over', is completely annihilated by the miserable-looking little spaniel attached to the sign by its lead. Similar simple incongruities fill the pictures of obviously long-closed shops bearing the legend 'Open'; the long and depressed-looking queue outside a shop advertising *Rychlý nákup* 'Quick shopping'; or the wall-mounted display of cheap dog-collars, leads and muzzles (the most expensive item is a trifling 18.50 Kčs) headed *Doplňkové půjčky*, that is, 'available with a top-up loan'.⁴⁸

In another photograph (Illustration 7, p. 81), time has stopped still in the form of a public clock, taken down from somewhere and propped against a parked car, in a kind of inverted image of the parking clock normally left *inside* the car on the dashboard. This clock, no matter how grotesque in this function anyway because of its size, and the fact that it will always show two o'clock, 'has' to be on the outside since the car is covered over. Although the clock is not distorted as in the famous Salvador Dalí painting,⁴⁹ this photograph invariably brings to the writer's mind Dalí's image of (amongst other things) the arbitrariness of time. I believe this is evidence of the genuine affinity between at least *toto město...* and one of the Surrealists in whom Hrabal expresses an interest in the 'introduction'. And almost the entire book could be viewed as an exercise in Surrealist *verismo*, easily redefined in terms of the Hrabalesque 'protocol'.

All the photographs, like the verbal texts, testify to the '...charm and strength of an original poetic vision',⁵⁰ whether of Peterka, or of Hrabal and his use of Peterka's photographs. Adding the photographs to the discussion adds to the 'polyphonic interweaving of themes'⁵¹ that so typifies this book in specific and Hrabal's work in general. It makes full the 'heterogeneous picture of the world compressed out of refuse, out of the shreds and remnants of what was once meaningful'.⁵²

In conclusion a final quotation: '... Hrabal's prose is epistemologically meaningful; on the basis of analysis it gives a resultant answer that is engrossing not just for the reader of *belles-lettres*.'⁵³ The reference may be to prose, but it applies equally well to other works, including *toto město...* Fuller interpretations of the nature of the 'answer' in this case are to be found in the works of others (Slavíčková, Jankovič, Pytlík, Roth). I would merely suggest that the reader of *toto město...* is less engrossed by the processes of analysis (the scissor-work) and more by those of synthesis (the paste-work) by which the montage is created. Moreover, as an overtly intellectual, as well as artistic exercise, Hrabal, I believe, is writing tongue-in-cheek when he says of this work that it has been 'volně sestaven' — freely or loosely, even randomly assembled, which all critics have taken at face value. For there is nothing haphazard about the siting of the first and several other photographs, or of the very last, which follows a blank black page — a game which leaves the reader thinking he is at the end of the book — and is of a notice saying 'Exit only'. Many juxtapositions of essentially different types of excerpts, with some obvious semantic links between them, such as the number of references to dogs in excerpts opposite the photograph of a greyhound and its master (which

together, from a distance or in silhouette, form a kind of three-legged proto-giraffe),⁵⁴ may also legitimately be deemed to be deliberate.

There is no mystery, no contradiction in this. The answer is in the adverb. *Volně* owes as much to the adjective *volní* 'volitional', that is, 'deliberate', as to the universally assumed *volný* 'free, loose'. And Hrabal did, after all, underline it.

Notes

- 1 *this city is in the joint care of its inhabitants*, Prague, 1967.
- 2 'A legend played on strings strung between the cradle and the coffin', incorporated in *Morytáty a legendy* (Penny-dreadfuls and legends), Prague, 1968.
- 3 'Hrabalovy literární montáže', *Slavica Lundensia*, 5, 1977, pp. 135–67. Slavíčková's article contains a detailed account of the relevant statistics, that is, the number and comparative length of the various extracts contained in the two versions.
- 4 '... se pokouší vyjádřit mnohostěnnost tohoto stylového neladu horizontálním tokem živé řeči, v útržcích zaznamenávající hřmot ulice a hlučných samot, zpětná zrcátka dávných legend, český humor výpovědí soudních spisů, orientální mysterium šachových a přece lidských osudů a sošnou poezii vertikál světců a jejich atributů, zdobících město. Nerytmickým střídáním těchto pěti motivů neladící věty mezi sebou navazují nutná přátelství, tak jako všechny věci a všichni lidé shrnutí a zabalení do tohoto ohromného prostěradla velkoměsta.' (Author's untitled, unpaginated 'foreword', which is reproduced in full as Appendix 1 to this volume.) Note that in this essay all quotations from Hrabal will be given in the original in footnotes; quotations from other sources will be given only in translation.
- 5 Štěpán Vlašín, in Milan Blahynka (ed.): *Čeští spisovatelé 20. století: slovníková příručka*, Prague, 1985, p. 209.
- 6 In this respect it is almost unique. The only other work that approaches it is *Kličky na kapesníku* (1990, see Introduction, p. 7), which carries only Hrabal's name on the jacket, but the title page not only describes the book in a sub-title gloss as a 'Román–interview' (Interview novel), but also carries the additional information that the questions were posed and the answers — Hrabal's literary and philosophical 'confessions' — recorded (on tape) by László Szigeti (a Slovak-Hungarian journalist). Superficially the text is similar in type to Karel Čapek's *Hovory s TGM* (which, however, has Čapek, not Masaryk, as the titular author), even down to the inclusion of photographs (32 of them, by Tibor Hrapka). Unlike Čapek's *Hovory*, the questions are all inserted, but distinguished typographically. *Kličky na kapesníku* ends with three 'post-scripts', two from Hrabal and one from Szigeti, further complicating Hrabal's authorship.
- 7 'Hrabalovy literární montáže' (note 3 above) and 'Některá pozorování o technice literární koláže u Hrabala', *Slavica Lundensia*, 8, 1980, pp. 65–112.
- 8 *Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala*, Prague, 1996, especially pp. 67–71. (Hereafter *Kapitoly z poetiky*.)
- 9 See Footnote 4 in Jankovič's *Kapitoly z poetiky*, p. 75.

- 10 The grounds are spelled out with conviction in 'Hrabalovy literární montáže', pp. 157–58. She takes matters further in her later essay ('Některá pozorování...'), where she also gives a critical survey of the relevant debate among other critics of the period.
- 11 'A tak, jak jsem se odstříhl (*sic*) od své minulosti, tak přece jenom mi ty nůžky zůstaly v prstech a já jsem ten čas začal používat nůžek po napsání textů, kdy jsem pracoval technikou „Cater” na textu jako na filmu. [...] A tak jsem ten čas psal s nůžkami v prstech, dokonce jsem psal jen proto, abych se dočkal chvíle, kdy napsaný text jsem mohl rozstříhat a sestavit v něco, co mne ohromovalo tak jako film. [...] Teď už si mohu dopřát ten luxus, že píši alla prima, že používám nůžky co nejméně...' (Hrabal: 'Proč píšu?' ['Why do I write?'], in *Život bez smokingu* [Life without evening dress], Prague, 1986, pp. 257, 258.) This is by no means the only occasion when Hrabal speaks in this vein, see Jankovič, *Kapitoly z poetiky*, *passim*, and his essay 'Příliš hlučná samota' in Jiří Holý *et al.*: *Český Parnas: vrcholy české literatury 1970–1990* (hereafter *Český Parnas*), Prague, 1993, pp. 134–41, *passim*.
- 12 Antonín Měšťan: *Česká literatura 1785–1985*, Toronto, 1987, p. 364. By the time Milan Jankovič wrote his comprehensive study on Hrabal's poetics much of the unravelling had been done for the Collected Works, though Jankovič occasionally hints that the 'final' organization of the Hrabal oeuvre may sometimes be detrimental. *toto město...* is omitted from the collected works, with only 'Legenda zahraná na strunách...' to represent it in the volume containing *Morytáty a legendy*. Despite the impressive work that went into the *Collected Works* (Miroslav Červenka *et al.* [eds]: *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, 19 vols, Prague, 1991–97), best appreciated from the complex bibliographical and indexing apparatus in Vol. 19, and despite the inference that 'Legenda zahraná na strunách...' is the 'definitive, authentic' version, I believe that Slavičková's compelling account of the unique qualities of both versions as functionally different works is reason enough for treating *toto město...* separately and that it should therefore have been included in any edition claiming completeness.
- 13 For example, in 'Proč píšu?', p. 257, he also mentions Eman(uel) Frynta's description of his writing as 'Leicastyl', 'capturing reality at the high points of dialogue and then composing a text out of it'. Other writers include Radko Pytlík: 'fragmentary ... stories combined in *Dancing Classes* by a form of cutting and montage...', describing the contrast between *Taneční hodiny* and *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* in the afterword to Bohumil Hrabal: *Trí novely*, Prague, 1989 (hereafter, Pytlík, 'Afterword'), p. 328; and Milan Jankovič: 'By cutting them up and by montage a new whole emerged (*Poetry Clubs*)', on *Příliš hlučná samota* and its merger with *Něžný barbar*, in *Český Parnas*, p. 135.
- 14 The second title-page reproduces the layout of the dust-jacket (see ill. 3), with the addition of the publisher, and place and date of publication. In its method the book has a precursor in *Mrtvomat. Montáž*, discussed in detail (but as collage) by Susanne Roth(-ová): 'Mrtvomat. Montáž — die erste literarische Collage Bohumil Hrabals', in *Schweizerische Beiträge zum IX. Internationalen Slavistenkongress in Kiev*, Bern, 1983, pp. 193–218.
- 15 Pytlík, 'Afterword', p. 324, on the forerunner (*Protokoly*, later *Utrpení starého Werthera*) of *Taneční hodiny pro starší a pokročilé*.

- 16 'Některá pozorování...', pp. 67–69. The relevant quotations are: 'As I construe it *ex post*, I came to literature via representative art and wondrous encounters', and: 'I meant that modern prose cannot be written without a measure of informedness, without a knowledge of what is going on in the other categories of art, chiefly in representational art. There even seem to be connecting vessels between representative vision and literature.' (p. 68)
- 17 See, for example, Jankovič, *Kapitoly z poetiky*, p. 30.
- 18 Jan Schneider, in Blahoslav Dokoupil and Miroslav Zelinský (eds): *Slovník českého románu 1945–1991*, Ostrava, 1992, p. 74. Note the use of the word 'episodes'. Jankovič in *Kapitoly z poetiky* frequently alludes to the episodic component of many of Hrabal's works, as does Slavičková. It is perhaps also worth recalling other Hrabal titles in which *dům* 'house' figures: *Inzerát na dům, ve kterém už nechci bydlet*, 'Dům, který se osvěžoval bleskem'.
- 19 I ignore the re-use of much of the material in 'Legenda hraná na strunách' as incorporated in *Morytáty a legendy*, since the many additions and structural alterations really constitute a new work, as indeed the change of title suggests. Slavičková would share the view. See Note 12.
- 20 The status of the second contributor to *Kličky na kapesníku* (see Note 6) is of an entirely different order.
- 21 Full title *Z tajů pražských pověstí*, 2 vols, 1904–05.
- 22 The very opacity of the function of this external feature of the book cries out for interpretation. At the risk of over-interpreting, and thereby imputing to its author an intention he may never have had, one might suggest that 'half of both' = ($\frac{1}{2} \times 2$) = 1, that is, that for all its superficially fragmentary nature — two types of material (words and pictures) from two contributing artists–authors (Hrabal and Peterka) — the book is to be viewed as unitary in nature.
- 23 Jan Schneider [see Note 18], p. 75.
- 24 See Jankovič, *Kapitoly z poetiky*, Footnote 3, p. 20, to his own reference to this attribute on p. 12.
- 25 That is, cleaning and general upkeep were not the responsibility of the local authority. The system operated variously well or badly, commensurate with the organizational skills of the *domovník* (concierge) and with respect for or fear of the *domovní důvěrník* (house steward), whose authority was often, but not necessarily, delegated as a matter of allegiance to the Party. The latter term had its own grotesque quality, since *důvěrník* also has the meaning 'confidant', based on *důvěra* 'trust'. All of this is the unspoken sub-text of the notice by the door.
- 26 Pytlík, 'Afterword', p. 323.
- 27 'Nyní se dostává do příčinné nouze. Je to poslední šance černého střelce.'
- 28 'Tak velká optika nutně vyvolává Osud. Vidí vzdálené zauzlení věcí.' Many of the chess quotations refer to 'optics', which is itself complementary to the optical, photographic element of the book.
- 29 'To je ta krize, střelec přichází, ale je stížen dvojnásobnou paralýzou.'
- 30 'Zub držící vytržený v kleštích, / nebo když jí byl právě vyražen dlátem nebo paličkou. / Patronka proti bolení zubů. / Apollonia.'
- 31 'Poustevník. / Tři laně. / Hrnc. / Klobouk nebo kápě zavěšeno na sluneční paprsek. / Čert na zádech. / Goar.' Many of the saints are no more familiar than this Goar.

- 32 'Chování a vystupování obviněného je bez závad, pročez lze říci, že má kladný poměr k dnešnímu státnímu řízení. Toto však lze říci jen potud, pokud je ve stavu strážlivém.' This and all the following quotations from the two 'informal' sources exemplify what Hrabal presumably meant when he referred to the 'Czech humour' in them. There is of course nothing uniquely Czech in most of them (apart from the content and phraseology reflecting the 'socialist' reality); many of the same kinds of infelicities of logic and language are possible in other languages. Many undoubtedly raise a smile, if not a guffaw, but any humour is entirely unconscious, and more in the interpretation than the delivery. Where the extracts, like the photographs, are a reflection of some managerially or merely coincidentally more ludicrous features of socialist Czechoslovakia, the humour is satirical, in Hrabal's selection of them with that precise intent, however any such aim might have been played down or denied by the author or his critics.
- 33 'Seděly jsme potom před kantýnou na trámkách a prknech. Já měla v kriminále na starosti skleník. Povídám: "Pane strážný, mně by se šikl tenhle trámek." Ale von se rozkřičel: "Ženská, to si nenechte zdát ani ve snách. To je rozebraná šibenice!"'
- 34 'Nic netušícímu řekl: "Ty kastráte dobytka hovězího!" A když jsem se optal: "Jak prosím?", dodal: "Máš v bolteci finální tovar metamorfózy poživatin." Když jsem si to dal přeložit, zhrozil jsem se. A žaluji.'
- 35 'Obviněný je mladý muž slušného zevnějšku, amerického typu, kdežto svědkyně je o 14 let starší jeho, nehezká, předčasně odkvětlá a ztrhaná žena. Pouze cosi nasládlého v obviněném umožňuje překonat tyto překážky.'
- 36 'Jste jako krajina po dešti. Napitá a napjatá.'
- 37 'Mám tak dobrý sluch, že kdybych byl policejním psem, tak bych měl to nejlepší žrádlo.' These examples are akin to what Jankovič describes (*Kapitoly z poetiky*, p. 14) as 'the unfeigned way of thinking of ordinary anonymous people' (*nefalšované smýšlení obyčejných anonymních lidí*) that contribute so much to the text of *Krásná Poldi*, set in the Kladno steelworks, one of the works that preceded *toto město...*
- 38 'Na motocyklu jsem jel bez řidičského průkazu, protože cestu vlakem neznám.' This and the following examples could be ideal material for such BBC programmes as *The News Quiz* and others where similar contributions are sent in by listeners.
- 39 'Otec obviněného byl dělníkem. Zemřel, když mu bylo devět let.'
- 40 'Mám syna, kterému je jeden a půl měsíce, a proto není nikde zaměstnán.'
- 41 'Má revma a jedno dítě, což je následkem vlhkého bytu.'
- 42 'Šla jsem normálně do zaměstnání a přičemž jsem otěhotněla.'
- 43 'Třídní původ St. Holoubka není v Praze, neboť do Prahy přišel v roce 1951. Jmenovaný je vdovcem, neb jest rozveden a žije po způsobu manželském s M. Krasavovou, vdovou, která je rovněž rozvedena.'
- 44 That is, *nerozlišující pozornost*, a quality, aptitude, or indeed the product of its application, widely used by Hrabal and those writing about him.
- 45 'Manželé Konipáskovi páchají v domě velmi často mravnostní delikty a to v tom, že se veřejně perou a dále si nadávají slovy, která velmi často používají malé děti. Jako vrchol všeho, když nemůže manželka Miroslava Konipáska nic svou výmluvností zmoci, vyzvedne sukně a ukazuje nahou zadnici a svůj pohlavní úd.'

- 46 Pytlík, 'Afterword', p. 326, on *Ostře sledované vlaky*.
- 47 The formal structural contrast between the two genetically related works is one of those described by Slavičková in her comparative analysis of them. Surprisingly, for all the detailed attention she applies to both works in both key articles, she says very little about the photos.
- 48 Such top-up loans, for rather more expensive consumer goods, were provided by the State Savings Bank and were repayable over up to five years at c. 5% interest.
- 49 That is, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931).
- 50 Pytlík, 'Afterword', p. 333, though on *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*.
- 51 Jankovič, *Kapitoly z poetiky*, p. 140.
- 52 *Ibid.* That this quotation applies more literally (see the chapter by Zuzana Stolz-Hladká) to *Příliš hlučná samota* is neither here nor there; it merely confirms the consistency of all Hrabal's work.
- 53 Emanuel Frynta, in 'Pábitel Bohumil Hrabal', afterword to *Pábitelé*, Prague, 1969, pp. 243–44.
- 54 The merger of the two bodies, the dog's and the man's — another sample of Surrealist *verismo* — is replicated in one excerpt on the opposite page, where, by a familiar defect of syntax, a dog and a man become confused: 'Bratr Bohuslav zabil psa mému otci, kterého snědl' (My brother Bohuslav killed the dog of my father whom/which he ate).

Illustrations

(photographs by Miroslav Peterka, other graphics by
Oldřich Hlavsa)

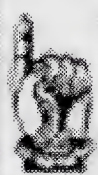
Bohumil
Hrabal
Miroslav
Peterka

toto město
je ve společné
péči obyvatel
/montáž/ 1967

text sestaven volně podle
Attribute der Heiligen,
Pražských tajností od Pop. Biliánové,
Mysterium der Schachkunst,
vyšetřovacích soudních spisů
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Bohumil Hrabal

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Miroslav
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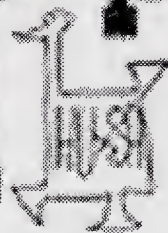
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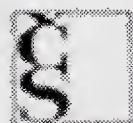
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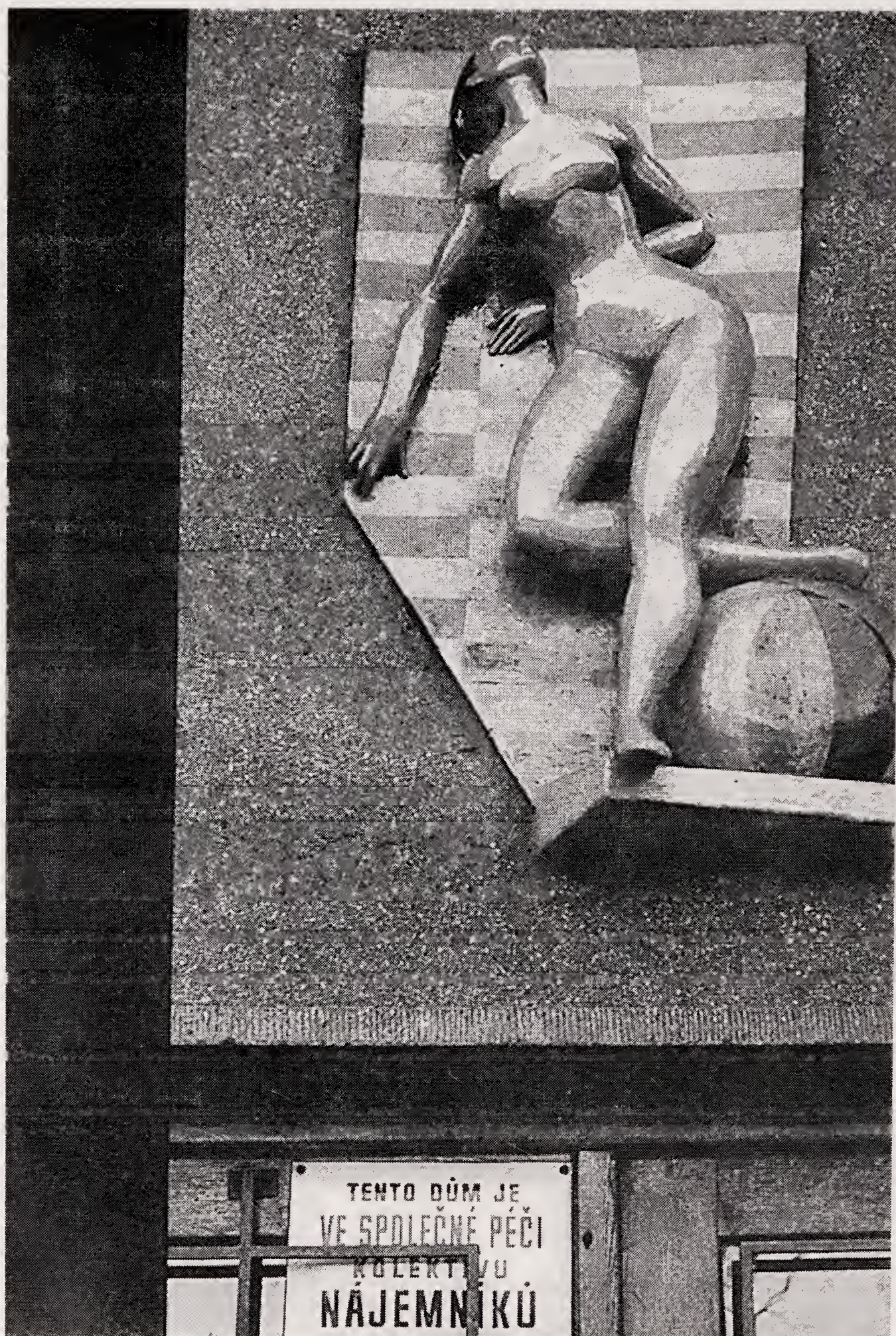


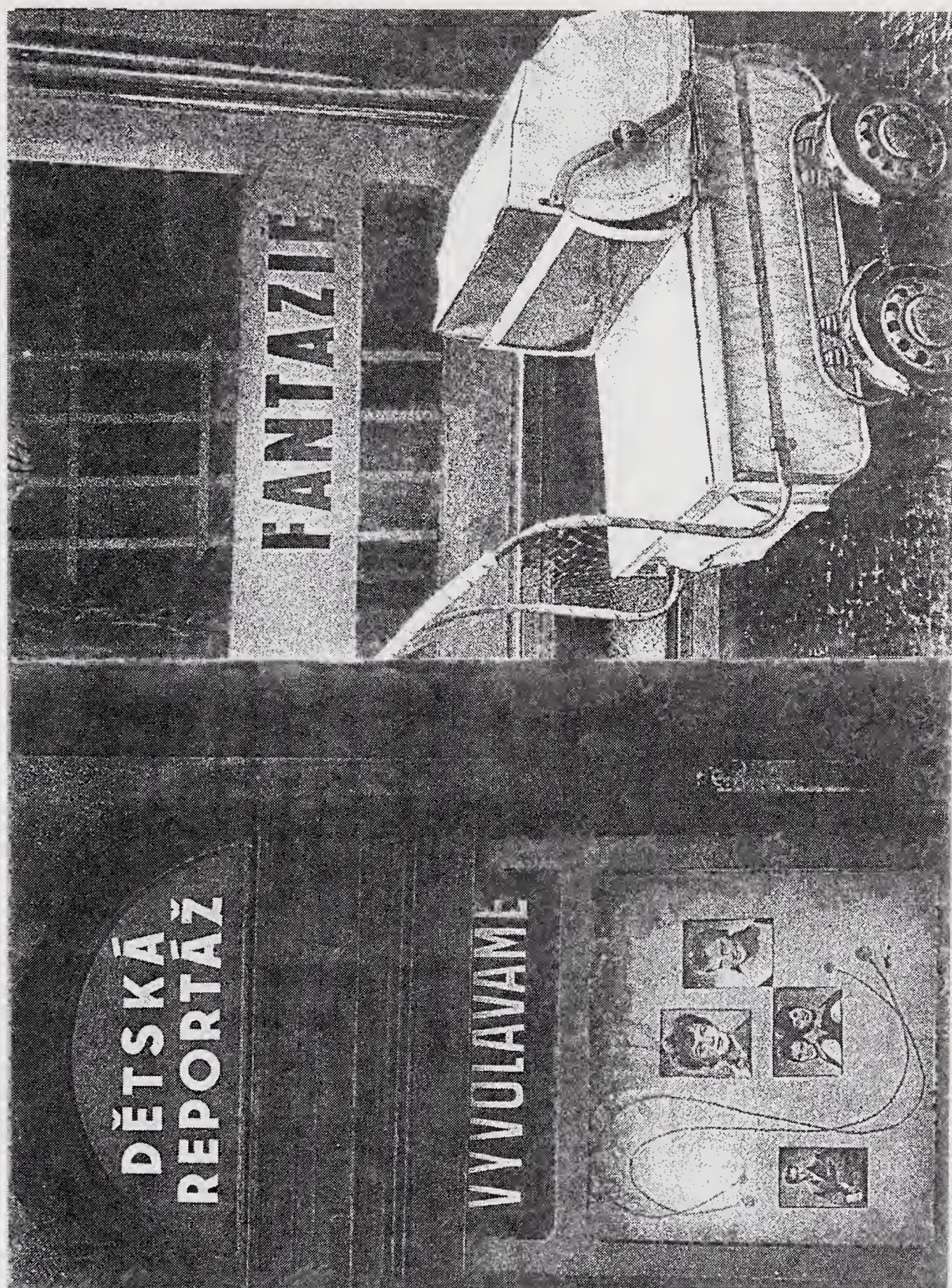
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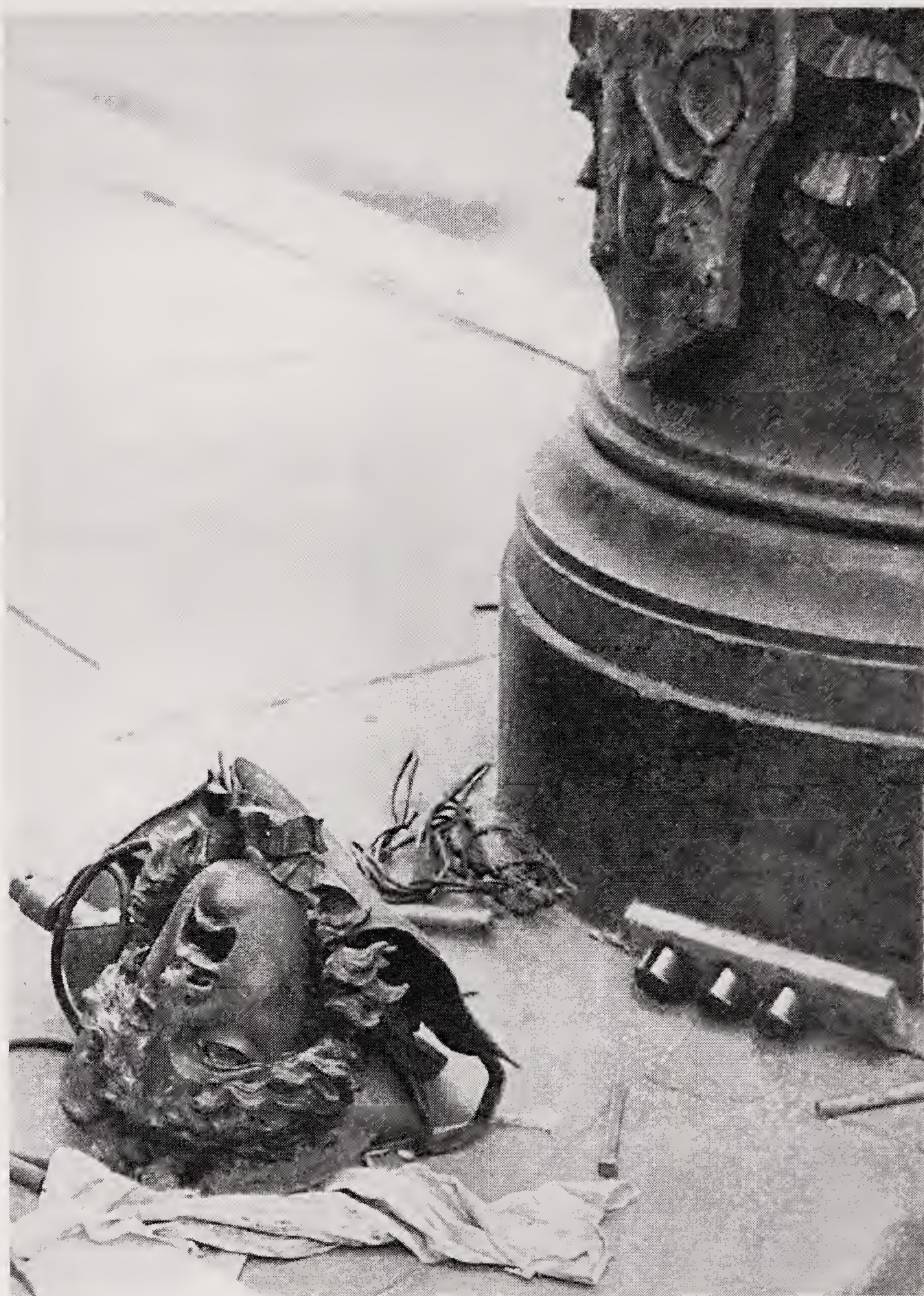
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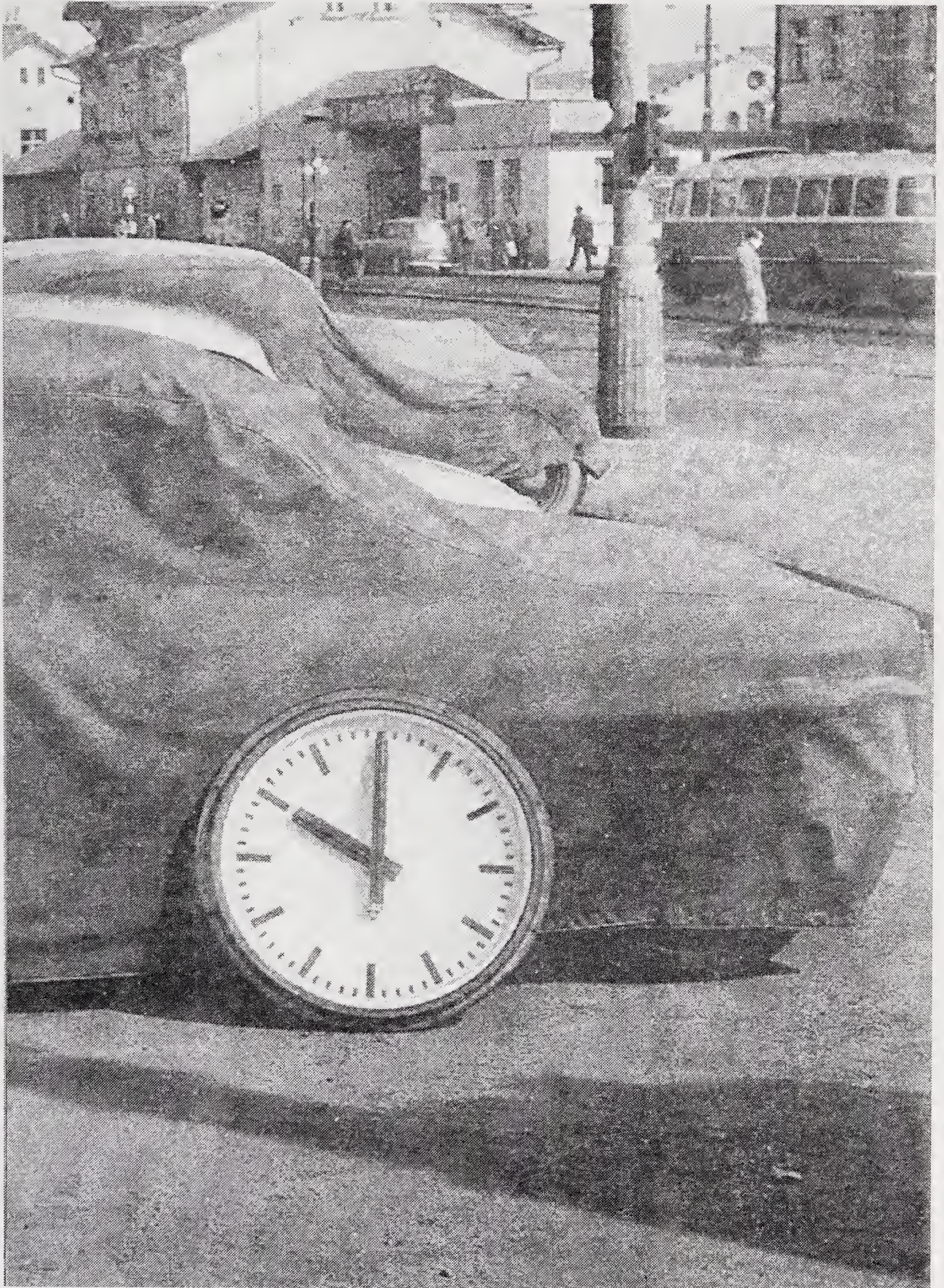
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The Avant-garde, Experience and Narration in Bohumil Hrabal's *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*

Tim Beasley-Murray

In this paper I set Hrabal's aesthetic in the context of theories of the historical Avant-garde. Examining one novel in particular, I look at the ways Hrabal's aesthetic is rooted in the aims and techniques of the Avant-garde, and develops and reworks them. To do this, I also draw on Walter Benjamin's theories of the relationship between experience and narration.

The experience of modernity and the Avant-Garde

In the debate surrounding the definition of the Avant-garde, it has been argued that the interwar Avant-garde reacts to the 'shrinkage of experience' and the inability of traditional forms of art to respond to this new state of affairs. In the words of Peter Bürger:

It was possible for the great bourgeois artists of the 18th century like Voltaire or Diderot to have an overview of the society, art, and science of their time; Balzac was the last one who could attempt to portray the totality of society. The specialization that developed in the course of the 19th century no longer permitted the individual to recognize the totality of society. Shrinkage of experience is the loss of a vantage point, from which society can be grasped as a whole.¹

The specialization to which art becomes subject, according to Bürger, is its establishment as an autonomous institution, separate from the praxis of life. The Aestheticism of the late nineteenth century represents the furthest point in this process. Here, art presents itself as entirely independent from the demand that it be socially useful. In reaction to this, the Avant-garde aims to reintegrate art and life, in a way in which will provide modes of representation true to the specific form of experience which characterizes modern life. As Breton proclaims in the first Surrealist manifesto: 'Experience has found itself increasingly circumscribed. It paces back and forth in a cage from which it is more and more difficult to make

it emerge.’² Avant-garde movements, such as Breton’s Surrealism, made it their goal to break the bars of that cage. Doing so involved renegotiating the boundaries between art and everyday life, and it is in this emphasis that Hrabal finds common ground with his Avant-garde predecessors.

Hrabal’s early work and the Avant-garde

The fact that the poetics of the early Hrabal emerge from the same territory as those of the Poetist and Surrealist Avant-garde movements is well documented.³ In an statement on his beginnings as a writer which appeared in the review *Kni ní kultura* in 1964, Hrabal tells us that *Majitelka hutí* (The mine-owner, 1950) was a response to Breton’s *Nadja*.⁴ Likewise, the poem ‘Bambino di Praga’, of the following year, has both a formal and intertextual basis in Apollinaire’s ‘Zone’. Hrabal himself spoke of his literary debut as inspired in no small degree by both Poetism and Surrealism:

Later on my friend, the musician and poet, Karel Marysko, introduced me to the surrealists, Andre Breton, Eluard, Salvador Dalí, Nezval, Biebl and Teige. So we experimented in a Surrealist manner, and we even invented a new movement, Neo-Poetism; we took our little collections of poetry to Teige and Bednář, but they didn’t have any time for our out-of-date Surrealist artefacts.⁵

A letter from Marysko to Hrabal on the nature of Neo-Poetism, written in that spring of 1945, is of particular interest:

For the time being, Bohumil, I accept the name, NEO-POETISM, that you have given to our movement. It takes something from Poetism as well as something from Surrealism... The difference between Surrealism and Neopoetism is roughly as follows: Surrealism is truthful, but only as a poem, that is to say, as emotion. Neopoetism has to be truthful not only as a poem, as emotion, but also as life itself, as you put it: ‘... every one of these poems has to be a thermometer thrust into a still molten present.’⁶

In other words, the difference for Marysko and Hrabal between their Neo-Poetism and the Surrealism and Poetism of the interwar period lay in a greater emphasis on the necessity of the sublation of art and life. The desire to out-Avant-garde the Avant-garde, to go further in combining art and life, is reiterated in the ‘Total Realism’ which Hrabal developed in the early 1950s. For all Karel Teige’s claims that Poetism would integrate art and life, the circus acrobats, the cowboys and Indians, the bright lights of the city, and the haze of Café Slavia could be argued to form as exclusive and aestheticized a repertoire of images as the swans and moons of Symbolism. Thus, where Poetism had often been selective in its use of the material of experience in art, subscribing to an aesthetic canon of its own

devising, Total Realism aimed to be total. As Susanne Roth puts it: 'Nothing was unworthy of inclusion in the work of art. All possible love is directed towards the mundane — the dust and dirt of factories and railway stations, rather than the fresh breezes of fields and forests.'⁷

In addition to programmatic statements of intent, a crucial connection between the early Hrabal and the interwar Avant-garde lies in Hrabal's use of the technique of montage.

Montage and the Avant-garde

The related techniques of collage and montage are the Avant-garde techniques *par excellence*, from Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque's sticking newspaper onto a painting, through John Heartfield's photomontages, Surrealist poetry's montage of associated images, to montage's threat to narrative coherence in Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. The Avant-garde work of art, constructed according to the principle of montage, powerfully negates the principle of mimesis whereby art and life are reconciled insofar as art is to life as representation is to ordered original. In Theodor Adorno's words, in montage: 'the appearance (*Schein*)⁸ of art being reconciled with a heterogeneous reality because it portrays it disintegrates as the work admits actual fragments of empirical reality, thus acknowledging the break and transforming it into aesthetic effect.'⁹

Montage, then, creates a disorderly dividing-line between reality and art, and hence is able to come closer to the nature of experience. By its fragmentary nature, it is able to admit and become part of the fragmentary experience characteristic of the modern world. Second, the work of montage withdraws the illusion fostered by the organic work of art that experience can be neatly and meaningfully packaged. In an organic, that is non-Avantgardiste, work of art, the meaning is given by the relation of parts to the whole. The work forms a signifying unity. In the non-organic work of montage, the parts lack necessity. As Bürger points out: '... in an automatic text that strings things together, some could be missing, yet the text would not be significantly altered.' Bürger draws the following conclusions:

The avantgardiste work of art neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock.... Shock is the means to break through artistic immanence and to usher in a change in the recipient's life praxis.¹⁰

The use of the shock of montage and the deployment of fragmentary material in order to break down the barrier between traditional, organic

art and the empirical and fragmentary experience of reality is characteristic of most of Hrabal's work of the 50s and 60s, from the associative stream of quickly intercut images of *Taneční hodiny pro starší a pokročilé* (Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age) to the absolute montage of *toto město je v společné péči obyvatel* (this city is in the joint care of its inhabitants); the latter is discussed in detail in the immediately preceding paper in this volume.

In this paper, however, I should like to concentrate on Hrabal's negotiation of the borders between life, art and experience in the case of *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* (I waited on the King of England), where, I argue, he attempts to go beyond the montage technique.

***Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* as a conventional text**

Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, written in 1971, although unpublished before 1982, is in many ways Hrabal's most conventional text. It is his longest work, and the one which, despite the description 'short stories' which Hrabal assigns to it, comes closest to the novel form, and from this point onwards I shall indeed call it a novel. The novel tells the story of the narrator's progress, through employment as a waiter in various hotels of the First (Czechoslovak) Republic, political and personal collaboration with the occupying Germans, a period as a millionaire hotel-owner in post-war Czechoslovakia, consequent imprisonment after the Communist take-over in February 1948, to his final occupation as a solitary road-mender in the deserted border country. As such, it approaches not only the novel form in general, but more specifically the *Bildungsroman*. This conventionality of genre is partnered by a fairly conventional narrative technique. In contrast to the disordered use of fragments of analepsis and prolepsis which typifies much of Hrabal's earlier work, the narrator, albeit in an associative stream of narration, nevertheless abides by a fundamentally chronological sequence. Moreover, the work is clearly divided into five roughly equal sections which are articulated in such a way as to provide a sense of overall structural unity. Despite all this, I argue that this most conventional of Hrabal's works displays the same Avant-gardiste concern to integrate art and experience.

***Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* as a Surrealist text**

Hrabal claims to have written *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* 'alla prima' over the course of a mere eighteen days. At the end of the novel, in

a paratextual afterword included in all editions, Hrabal describes this process:

These texts were written in the sharp, summer sun which heated up the typewriter so much that a couple of times a minute it would bite and stutter. Since I was unable to look at the dazzlingly white pieces of paper, I didn't have any control over what I wrote; so I wrote in the luminous intoxication of the automatic method; the light of the sun blinded me to such an extent that I could only see the outlines of the scintillating typewriter... P.S. During this summer month whilst I've been writing this text, I have been living under the influence of Salvador Dalí's 'artificial memories' and Freud's 'strangulation affect which finds its expression in speech'.¹¹

Hrabal's description of his writing process is illuminating. The stabbing motion needed to tap out a text on a white-hot typewriter is the motion of montage.¹² It is the motion of a writing that rejects the organic unity of the art-work and seeks to replicate the shock experience of life. Moreover, Hrabal's novel, he claims, is a form of automatic writing.¹³ Automatic writing is itself writing that pulses with the shocks and tremors of the Unconscious. Automatic writing had represented for the Surrealists a means whereby they could penetrate the veil of means-end rationality, which prevents the modern subject from experiencing the world in its intoxicating fullness. In by-passing the control and censorship of the conscious, and drawing instead directly on the energies of the unconscious, automatic writing seeks to explore the stuff of which experience is made. In a similar fashion to a Surrealist text, *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* is constructed around and gains narrative momentum through moments of surrealist intoxication which break through the surface of conscious life — Hrabal himself uses the word, 'intoxication', above to describe his writing process. In 'traditional' Surrealism, these moments of access to the surreal are normally classified as follows: experience of the miraculous (*la merveilleuse*), the chance event (as exemplified in the *objet trouvé* or *hazard objectif*), and the experience of metamorphosis (as, for example, in Breton and Soupault's *Les Champs Magnétiques*, or, closer to home for Hrabal, in Vítězslav Nezval's, admittedly Poetist, rather than Surrealist 'Podivuhodný kouzelník' (The marvellous magician; 1930).

Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále is an associative montage of anecdotes and images. Furthermore, exploitation of the different forms of Surrealist interstices between the conscious and unconscious can be seen in *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*. The miraculous is present in the repeated intervention of the phrase: *a neuvěřitelný se stalo skutkem* (and the incredible became fact),¹⁴ used to describe changes and events. This phrase punctuates the text with an almost liturgical regularity and intensity.

Metamorphosis and renewal are an intrinsic part of the radical changes which the narrator undergoes, as well as of his repeated anagnoreses. They also play an important role in the theme of the search for the new man which surfaces, for example, in the ravings of the poet, Tonda Jodl, or in the presentation of Nazi ideology. Chance too is a guiding feature of the narration; so for example, it is a chance case of mistaken identity which allows the narrator to claim to have been part of the anti-German resistance, just as it is a chance event that prevents him from committing suicide. A key, however, to the way in which the novel uses forms of Surrealist intoxication, is the shift which occurs in the use of the sense of beauty, and it is this that I should like to discuss in a more detail.

Beauty and intoxication

Any reader of Hrabal is struck by the sheer number of appearances of the words *krása* (beauty) and *krásný* (beautiful) and their derivatives. On closer inspection, reference to beauty is almost always linked to intensity of experience and intoxication, in the Surrealist sense. Thus, the intoxication of sensuality provides a source of beauty. Of his experience in the brothel, the narrator says: ‘and I drew in the fragrance of her belly, and she sighed and it was so forbiddenly beautiful.’¹⁵ The boss of Hotel Tichota, a lover of fine wines, ‘grew beautiful with every sip’.¹⁶ The cretinous behaviour of the narrator’s son, joyfully applauding a bombing raid, suddenly makes him beautiful.¹⁷ Similarly, the intoxication of religion brings beauty. During the spontaneous mass which some interned millionaires celebrate on their last evening in the prison camp, we read that ‘all those faces were as if illuminated by something higher and more beautiful, which is perhaps peculiar to man’.¹⁸

Yet beauty should not be interpreted here as meaning the aesthetic in a conventional sense. As the last phrase of the quotation indicates, the beautiful is, even in its religious incarnation, rooted in human experience. Indeed, in the text, it tends to serve as a byword for experience itself. The word *krásný* is used by Hrabal less to describe the aesthetic than as a means to denote the intensity of experience. In a way which parallels the Shklovskii of ‘Art as Device’, aesthetic experience renews the experience of the world.¹⁹ Yet, in opposition to Shklovskii, the aesthetic does not aim beyond life. Beauty emerges from life and resides in all of life.²⁰

This point deserves some illustration: at the Hotel Paříž (Paris), the waiter Karel’s trick of carrying an unfeasibly large number of plates is described as being ‘almost a cabaret turn’,²¹ and for Hrabal work in general, here specifically the job of waiting on tables, has its own beauty.

Even in nature, beauty does not exist independently of human experience. Thus we read that ‘through the presence of the author [Steinbeck], the countryside [around the narrator’s hotel] suddenly became beautiful’.²² Similarly, the beauty immanent in some specially resonant pines, which will be later made into violins, must first be recognised and experienced by the narrator and his fellow workers. Finally and most importantly, experience and beauty cannot be sanitised; horror and suffering belong here too. Thus, speaking of the borstal girl with whom he works as a forester before becoming a road-mender, the narrator says: ‘and I knew exactly that her life would be tragically beautiful, that life with her would be for any man suffering and fulfilment simultaneously.’²³ Through this redefinition of the aesthetic, then, Hrabal carries on the aims of the Avant-garde in which the traditional boundaries between the aesthetic and life are breached.

Experience, narrative and memory

The text at hand, however, is by no means a classically Surrealist text, and Hrabal’s text attempts to go beyond the mere intoxication of Surrealism. In his essay, ‘On Surrealism’, Benjamin writes: ‘The loosening of the self by intoxication is, at the same time, the fruitful living experience that allowed these people to step outside the domain of intoxication.’²⁴ Benjamin, then, points out that the forms of Surrealist intoxication which provide access to experience of the lived (*Erlebnis*) are only the first step to what he calls a ‘profane illumination’, by which he means experience which has truly been understood (*Erfahrung*). In a later comment on the subject of his earlier essay, he makes this point more explicitly:

A constructive case of revelation of an experience (*Erfahrung*). The scene of this revelation is the memory. The related experiences (*Erlebnisse*) do not constitute, when they occur, revelation, but remain concealed to the one experiencing. They only become revelation when more and more people become aware of their analogy in retrospect.²⁵

For Benjamin, pure sensuous–material experience, not-yet-worked-through (*Erlebnis*), can be redeemed from the sphere of the unconscious and ‘raw’ experience. It becomes worked-through experience (*Erfahrung*) by the genuine narration (*Erzählung*), which is only possible from the standpoint of memory. Benjamin, then, points the way towards an automatic writing mediated by memory which would transform the *Erlebnisse* of unconscious experience into narratable *Erfahrung*.

This move from *Erlebnis* through memory to *Erfahrung* and *Erzählung* is a path which Hrabal attempts to follow. As stated in his afterword,

Hrabal joins the Freudian appeal to the unconscious with a notion of ‘artificial memories’. Despite the fact that, at the beginning of the novel, the narration appears to be taking place in a present-time situation of pub story-telling, we find out by the end that the narrator is remembering experience. Each chapter or story of the novel is introduced by the phrase: ‘Pay attention to what I am about to tell you.’²⁶ By the end, however, a story-telling narrator is replaced by a novel-writing narrator and the temporal perspective of narrating has shifted.²⁷ The metaphor used for this is tied in with his final occupation as a road-mender, clearing the road to the village of snow, and the notion of the ‘journey or path of life’.

... and I said to myself that by day I would look for the track to the village, and by night I would write and look for the way back, and walk along it and sweep away the snow which has covered my past ... and so try, through writing and the written word, to ask myself about myself.²⁸

It is this use of memory which makes Hrabal’s novel less a text of automatic intoxication through the unconscious than a Surrealist narrative which is therapeutic and recuperative. Automatic writing remains a form of montage technique, since the associative leaps of the unconscious gives the text a fragmentary quality to the conscious mind. Yet in this text, the unconscious flow of images is mediated through the projection of a remembering subject who pieces together what had been fragmentary. The fragments of *Erlebnis* which prevent narration, the snow which covers the path, are swept away by memory to reveal what has been redeemed as *Erfahrung* in narration. Elsewhere, the sublation of the fragmentary nature of experience into narration is made more explicit, when the narrator/road-mender literally first finds his voice:

And I could feel that with that singing that I was shaking out of myself drawers and boxes full of expired bills of exchange and unnecessary letters and postcards, that out of my mouth were pouring scraps of old, half-torn posters, stuck on top of each other, which, in their ripped-up state, made up senseless texts, mixing up announcements for football matches with announcements for concerts, exhibition posters getting tied up with brass bands, and everything which settles in a person like smoke in a smoker’s lungs.²⁹

Automatic writing through memory enables the narrator to sew together the fragments of montage in a way which communicates worked-through experience. Hrabal’s novel is a brave attempt to go beyond the impasse of Avant-gardiste reliance on shock and montage. It uses the montage technique of association yet reassembles those fragments through the intervention of a remembering subject. It does this, however, at a price that jeopardizes the Avant-garde’s aim to sublimate art and life.

The price of narration

a. Memory and distance

Referring to what he describes as the decline in communicable experience after the first world war in the essay 'The story teller', Benjamin writes: '... for never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power.'³⁰ In other words, the modern subject is such a small part of such huge phenomena as tactical warfare, inflation and so on, that he or she lacks the distance to perceive them as a whole. This is the vantage-point the loss of which is lamented in my very first quotation from Bürger above. Memory provides this distance, and the wholeness of the subject which enables him or her to experience life as a narratable whole. It is only with the distance of memory that Hrabal's narrator is able to write: 'More and more I compared the upkeep of this path with the upkeep of my life which revealed itself to me backwards, as if it had happened to someone else, as if my whole life up until that point had been a novel, a book that someone else had written whole life began to seem like a novel which someone else had written.'³¹

The distance of memory, however, is a retreat from life. The narrator's road-mender gradually removes himself from society, cutting his links even with the local village in the remote and depopulated borderland, retreating finally to hermit-like communion with his animals. What is left of the Avant-garde intent to integrate life and art is the narrator's final, phantasmagorical desire to be buried on a ridge which forms a watershed so that the chemical residues of his body might find their way both via the Danube to the Black Sea and via the Elbe to the North Sea. Memory might provide the distance to narrate sense out of the scraps of life, but the price to be paid is the loss of life itself.

b. Memory and death

In the same essay, Benjamin writes:

A man's knowledge and wisdom, but above all his real life — and this is the stuff of which true stories are made — first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death... A man who died at thirty-five... will appear to remembrance at every point of his life as a man who dies at thirty-five... the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life.³²

Death, then, sublates the fragmentary experience of life into narratable experience. In the words of Hrabal's narrator:

... I realized that the essence of life is questioning oneself about death, how I will behave when my time comes, that not death, in fact, but questioning oneself is a conversation from the point of view of the infinite and the eternal, that looking for the solution to death is the beginning of thinking in and about beauty.³³

The statement that the essence of life is questioning oneself about death is a weak paradox. Life is only to be understood from the standpoint of death. Hrabal's use of associative technique, his post-Surrealist aesthetic of intoxication and of everyday beauty, his montage of anecdote and image seek to conjoin art and life. Finally, however, one could argue that Hrabal retreats from the Avant-garde with the resigned suggestion that the fragments of which life is made can be made sense of and narrated only from beyond the grave. In this sense, *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále* represents either a self-overcoming or a capitulation of the Avant-garde aesthetic.

Notes

- 1 Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus. Studien zum Problem der avantgardistischen Literatur*, Frankfurt/Main, 1974, p. 194. Bürger's definition of the Avant-garde, in this text and his *Theory of the Avant-garde*, remains the most influential, if also a controversial contribution to this debate. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Minneapolis, 1989.
- 2 André Breton, 'Manifeste du surréalisme' (1924) in *Manifestes du surréalisme*, Paris, 1994, pp. 13–60 (20).
- 3 See, for example, Václav Černý, 'Za hádankami Bohumila Hrabala' in *Eseje o české a slovenské próze*, Prague, 1994, pp. 89–134; Jozef Kroutvor, 'Hrabal, Mácha a surrealisté' and Robert Kalivoda, 'Básnický čin Bohumila Hrabala aneb Bohumila Hrabal a český surrealismus' in Milan Jankovič and Jozef Zúmr (eds.), *Hrabaliana: sborník prací k 75. narozeninám Bohumila Hrabala*, Prague, 1990; Susanne Roth, *Laute Einsamkeit und bitteres Glück. Zur poetischen Welt von Bohumil Hrabals Prosa*, Berne, 1986, especially pp. 70–80 (revised and edited Czech translation: *Hlučná samota a hořké štěstí Bohumila Hrabala; k poetickému světu autorových próz*, Prague, 1990).
- 4 Bohumil Hrabal, 'Kus řeči', *Kni ní kultura*, Vol. I, no. 1, p. 34, reproduced as an appendix to Susanne Roth, *Laute Einsamkeit und bitteres Glück*, pp. 246–47 (247).
- 5 'Potom mě můj přítel Karel Marysko, hudebník a básník, seznámil se surrealisty, André Bretonem, Éluardem, Salvadorem Dalím, Nezvaletm, Bieblem a Teigem. Tak jsme pábili surrealisticky, dokonce jsme vymysleli nový směr, neopoetismus, nosili jsme svoje sbírečky k Teigemu nebo Bednářovi, kteří neměli pochopení pro opožděné surrealistické artifakty.' *Ibid.*, p. 246.

- 6 'Název Tvůj, Bohouši, pro tento náš směr, který jmenuješ NEO-POETISMUS, zatím přijímám. Má cosi z poetismu plus ještě něco ze surrealismu... Rozdíl mezi surrealismem a neopoetismem je asi takový: surrealismus je pravdivý, ale jen jako báseň, respektive jako emoce. Neopoetismus musí být pravdivý nejen jako báseň a emoce, ale i jako život sám, to je dle Tvých slov "... musí každá taková báseň být teploměrem zasaženým do ještě žhoucí přítomnosti.'" Karel Marysko, 'Dopis Bohumilu Hrabalovi, 24. února 1945' in Milan Jankovič and Jozef Zúmr (eds), *Hrabaliana*, pp. 51–55 (51).
- 7 Susanne Roth, *Laute Einsamkeit und bitteres Glück*, p. 77. The sense that nothing was unworthy of inclusion in the work of art also reflects the democratizing aim of the beginnings of Socialist Realism and a Socialist Realist sense of disillusion with a bourgeois culture that had seemed to be complicit in the horrors of the Second World War. There is, then, curious common-ground that links the pioneers of Socialist Realism and those, such as Hrabal, who continue in the Avant-garde. For further discussion of these issues, see Tim Beasley-Murray: 'The Path towards Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia, 1945–48' in R. B. Pynsent and László Péter, *The Phoney Peace*, London, 2000, pp. 473–84.
- 8 *Schein* here carries both senses also carried by the English word *appearance*, namely 'manifestation' and 'illusion'.
- 9 Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt/Main, p. 232.
- 10 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, p. 80.
- 11 'Texty jsou psány v prudkém letním slunci, které rozpalovalo psací stroj tak, až se několikrát za minutu zakusoval a koktal. Nemoha hleděti na oslnivě bílé čtvrtky papíru, neměl jsem kontrolu toho, co jsem psal, psal jsem tedy ve světelném opojení automatickou metodou, světlo slunce mne tak oslepovalo, že jsem viděl jen obrysy třpytícího stroje... P.S. Ten letní měsíc, kdy jsem tento text psal, jsem žil pod dojetím 'uměle vzpomínky' Salvadora Daliho a Freudova "uškrtnutého afektu, který nachází průchod v řeči". Bohumil Hrabal, *Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*, Praha, 1993, p. 188. Subsequent references to this work in parentheses are to this edition.
- 12 Walter Benjamin argues that Baudelaire was the first poet to attempt to incorporate modern shock experience into lyric poetry. The following passage provides a striking parallel to Hrabal's afterword: 'Baudelaire placed the shock experience at the very centre of his artistic work... Baudelaire made it his business to parry the shocks, no matter where they might come from, with his spiritual and physical self. This shock defence is depicted graphically in an attitude of combat... Baudelaire describes his friend Constantin Guys, whom he visits when Paris is asleep: "... how he stands there, bent over his table... how he *stabs away* with his pencil, his pen, his brush...".' Walter Benjamin: 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations*, London, 1992, pp. 152–96 (59–60). Hrabal also adopts an attitude of combat to parry shock.
- 13 It seems unlikely that the method Hrabal employed was very automatic. This need not matter. Very little Surrealist writing ever followed the precepts of Breton and Soupault, even Breton and Soupault's first experiments. What is important is the notion of automatic writing as a programmatic principle.
- 14 The phrase occurs in both the colloquial *neuvěřitelný* and standard Czech form *neuvěřitelné* according to register.

- 15 'voněl jsem jí k břichu a ona oddychovala a bylo to tak zakázaně krásné....' (p. 14)
- 16 'za každým napitím tak nějak zkrásněl ten můj šéf.' (p. 45)
- 17 'zatímco ostatní děti měly v kalhotkách, tak Siegfried tleskal ručkama a smál se a najednou byl tak krásný...' (while the other children were shitting their pants, Siegfried was clapping his little hands and suddenly he was so beautiful; p. 126)
- 18 '... ale všechny ty tváře jako by byly ožehnuté něčím vyšším a krásnějším, co asi člověk má...' (p. 159)
- 19 See Viktor Shklovsky: 'Art as Device', in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, London, 1990, pp. 3–24.
- 20 Michael Heim treats Hrabal's aesthetic of intense experience in an essay in which he also points out the parallel with Formalist *ostranenie* (defamiliarization). Heim, however, misinterprets Hrabal's aesthetic when he asserts that: 'the goal of the aesthetic of the powerful experience lies not in reproducing reality, but in bypassing reality. Its main concern is not life, but something larger than life.' My interpretation is opposed to this, arguing that Hrabal's avant-gardiste intent is not to bypass life, but to transform both life and art by breaking down the borders that separate them. Michael Heim: 'Hrabal's Aesthetic of the Powerful Experience', in Henrik Birnbaum and Thomas Eekman (eds), *Fiction and Drama in Eastern and Southeastern Europe*, Columbus, 1980, pp. 201–06 (203).
- 21 '... skoro artistické číslo...' (p. 73)
- 22 '... ale tím spisovatelem byla najednou ta krajina tak krásná...' (p. 141)
- 23 '... ale já jsem věděl, že... její život bude smutně krásný, že život s ní bude pro muže trápením a naplněním současně...' (p. 169)
- 24 Walter Benjamin, 'On Surrealism' in *One-Way Street*, London, 1997, pp. 225–39 (227).
- 25 Hand-written note made by Benjamin concerning the Surrealism essay, included in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften II 3*, Frankfurt/Main, 1991, p. 1021.
- 26 'Dávejte pozor, co vám teďka řeknu.'
- 27 The penultimate sentence of the text reads: '... this medal gave me the strength to write this story for my readers... of how the incredible became fact.' ('... ten řád mi dal sílu, abych čtenářům napsal tenhle příběh... jak neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem.' p. 187.)
- 28 '... a řekl jsem si, že ve dne budu hledat cestu k vesnici a večer budu psát, hledat cestu nazpátek a pak po ní jít a odhrabávat sníh, který zasypal moji minulost... a tak se pokusit, abych se i písmem a psaním vyptával sám na sebe.' (p. 184)
- 29 '... avšak já jsem cítil, že tím zpíváním vysypávám ze sebe škatulky a zásuvky plné propadlých smének a zbytečných dopisů a pohlednic, že ústy se mi odvárají útržky starých napolo roztrhaných, jeden druhým přelepených plakátů, které ve stržení tvoří nesmyslné texty, mísící oznámení fotbalových zápasů s oznámením koncertů, plakáty výstav se propojují s dechovkami, všechno to usedlé v člověku tak, jako dým a kouř v kuřákových plicích.' (p. 173)
- 30 Walter Benjamin, 'The story teller: Reflections on the work of Nikolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, London, 1992, pp. 83–107 (84).

- 31 'Ostatně čím dál tím víc jsem shledával údržbu téhle cesty s údržbou svého života, který se mi jevil zpátky, jako by se stal někomu jinému, jako by celý můj život až jsem byl roman, kniha, kterou napsal někdo jiný...' (p.176)
- 32 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 99.
- 33 '... já jsem... zjistil, že podstata života je ve vyptávání se na smrt, jak já se budu chovat, až přijde ten můj čas, že vlastně smrt, ne to vyptávání se sebe sama, je hovor pod zorným úhlem nekonečna a věčnosti, že už řešení té smrti je počátek myšlení v krásném a o krásném.' (p. 178)

Hrabal's Autobiographical Trilogy

Robert B. Pynsent

I use the epithet 'autobiographical' for Hrabal's 1980s trilogy because that is the convention and, like many other literary critical conventions, the epithet is somewhat misleading, though seductive. In book form the trilogy was first published abroad, volume three, *Proluky* (Vacant lots), in 1986 and volumes one and two, *Svatby v domě* (Weddings in the house) and *Vita nuova*, in 1987.¹ The first volume covers the 1950s, the second c. 1959 to c. 1962, and the third 1963 to the beginning of the 1970s; all volumes, however, contain reminiscences from the beginning of the twentieth century up to mid-century.

An invention of the self-centred English in the 1790s, and still regarded by the French as denoting a particularly English genre as late as 1866,² the term autobiography primarily suggests a work describing the mental development and experiences of the person whose name is on the title page: in other words, a work where the author, narrator and main character are one and the same person. One does not have to be a literary theorist to see immediately that such a notion is at best unacceptable.

No one, however, will deny that autobiography or, indeed, fiction that serves to interpret the implied author's past (for example, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* or, in Czech literature, say Kundera's *Život je jinde* [Life is elsewhere]), constitutes an attempt at literary self-portraiture. Buckley suggests that autobiography 'sets the self-portrait in time and motion, presenting, as it does, a changing personality, developing, declining, remembering, regretting, rather than a fixed and finite impression'³ like that of a painter. Spengemann doubts the very notion of autobiography as a literary form: 'Without a self one cannot write about it, but whatever one writes will be about the self it constructs. Autobiography thus becomes synonymous with symbolic action in any form, and the word ceases to designate a particular kind of writing.'⁴ Hrabal saw the problem and chose to make his wife, Eliška/Pipsi, narrator of the trilogy. This choice brings

the trilogy close to his semi-autobiographical fiction of the 1970s and early 1980s. On the other hand, in choosing his wife as his narrator, an author runs certain risks. First, though his intention may be to use his wife as a device to ensure modesty in this self-portrait, the device may easily become a vehicle for self-aggrandisement. Secondly, she may become a device for avoiding judgement on matters political and personal. Nevertheless, the choice may have positive uses, for example to express the main character's self-criticism without his appearing pie-eyed; in other words, Eliška may be considered the subject's inner voice or conscience — at least in some passages. Choosing one's wife as one's narrator also comes rather close to invading the privacy of one's wife, putting the intimate on public display, a piece of bad manners. Here, however, we may be noting an old device of Hrabal's, transgressing taboos to draw attention to what he considered the liberation of the text. From the beginning of his writing career, as Milan Jankovič has remarked, Hrabal enjoyed 'provocatively breaking accepted [*sic*] taboos, especially erotic taboos'.⁵

In fact, apart from Eliška, who none the less remains dominant, Hrabal uses several narrators in all three volumes: in particular Hrabal himself, Hrabal's mother, the graphic artist Vladimír Boudník, the writers Karel Marysko and Jiří Kolář — and in *Proluky* two paraplegics. Though Hrabal may more or less delineate slight differences in psychology between the narrators, actually all the narrations merge freely with Eliška's, and a unified world-view results. Furthermore, this view merges with Hrabal's own and becomes an inbuilt complement to it. He makes that graphically clear by having his narrator repeat a scene where in the first version the actant is Hrabal, in the second Eliška. One day, while bathing in the river, Hrabal suddenly emerges from the water with a used condom caught round one ear and he is not aware of it; later, Eliška emerges from the water, and she has a used condom hanging over her shoulder, is horrified, throws it back and 'my husband fairly howled with laughter at me' (*VN*, p. 226). However much the fictionalised narrator and fictionalised main character function in complementary fusion, still the trilogy gives the impression not so much of an autobiography as of a series of reminiscences, as an allobiography, that is an apparently autobiographical set of memories that provides a large amount of biographical information about others and does not concentrate on the spiritual development of a single individual. Indeed, rather as in the majority of Hrabal's fiction, no one develops psychologically in the trilogy. 'Characters' are verbal text rather than psychologically modelled actants. The allobiographical nature of the work is supported by its narration, a narrative flow resembling a series of monologues, or, in the case of *Vita nuova*, one

single monologue enveloping others. *Vita nuova* lacks punctuation virtually entirely, and capital letters are used to represent pauses for breath rather than the beginnings of sentences.⁶

In these would-be reminiscences, the narrator-wife generally speaking appears to 'say' of Hrabal what he would like the reader to think of him. For example: 'the only thing I valued in my husband was that he had a very poor opinion of himself' (*P*, p. 59). Here the narrator exaggerates ironically by the phrase 'the only thing', since she expresses enormous admiration for Hrabal elsewhere, for example, for the way he eats bread and dripping in bed; at the same time, the 'poor opinion' does serve to indicate Hrabal's emotional insecurity, however much that may appear, superficially, to contrast with his bragging and his constant declaration that he is No. 1 beer-drinker or pub story-teller.

Such declarations serve as a unifying refrain of the trilogy, and it makes little difference to the interpretation of the work whether or not we consider the refrain self-ironic or self-deprecating on the part of the author. Buckley maintains that the 'search for a pattern of order is the guiding impulse in nearly all autobiography, and the perception of some superintending design in the individual life determines the choice among remembered incidents and emotions and the weight attached to selected episodes'.⁷ Formally, the chief instrument of order in the episodic trilogy is the narrator-wife; psychologically, the major instrument of order is the mutual emotional dependence of the narrator and the main character. The 'choice of remembered incidents' depends largely on the desire to express the affirmation of life, living (*Lebensbejahung*).

The life-affirmation lies in a dialectic relationship with a concern for death, which the narrator develops most in the third volume, *Proluky*, where it parallels Hrabal's fame as a writer, the Warsaw Pact Intervention of 1968 and Hrabal's subsequent proscription. Psychologically, this relationship is developed in the evolution of Hrabal's insouciant experience of near-death at the age of five into a fear of death associated with vainglory. Aesthetically, this relationship is developed by the employment of the grotesque, which, again, reaches its zenith in the third volume. Notably, this third volume has as its motto Baudelaire's statement that the grotesque is absolute comedy. In the first volume, *Svatby v domě*, death plays a considerable role, but is counterbalanced by sex: *Vita nuova* is entirely dominated by life-affirmation; death constitutes the main theme of *Proluky*.

The grotesque consists in the fusion of incompatibles for comic or ironic effect. I feel secure in asserting that being alive is incompatible with being dead, whatever some metempsychotics or zombies might claim. In

Hrabal we may speak of life as the negation of death or as a liberation from death, and of life as a gift. A positively morbid fear of death, of death as something unnatural, blends with a celebration of Nature and her gifts, especially the gifts of alcohol, pork and bread and dripping. We might even see maudlin self-pity in Hrabal's fear of death (which again we might associate with the way he gazes at himself in the looking-glass when he suspects a sickness is coming upon him, and thus, possibly, death); in an apostrophe to the narrator, the main character formulates his chief psychological traits as follows — the passage exemplifies the confessional nature of much of the trilogy where Eliška acts as confessor:

I've never been a harlequin, never been capable of luring someone else's girl from him; I was one who had all those beauties taken away from him; harlequins took them away from me, a Pierrot. This was my image as a young man: a sad young gentleman who hasn't the courage to fight for his love; for I always preferred ruin, unhappiness and death; that was my poetics as a boy; I'm still a sad clown; I'm still Pierrot... That's why I drink so bloody much and I don't even like the taste of the stuff, but I drink so that I can have some position in society as well, so that I can, at least a bit, be No. 1... [...] now I feel ashamed in front of you and in front of myself... I know that if I had two pints now I'd chirp up, and rise out of this dying. (SVD, pp. 79–80)⁸

A little later (SVD, p. 87), the narrator becomes aware that he is indeed a Pierrot, a Pierrot whom people consider to be a harlequin. In *Proluky* the link between the fear of death and the fear of not being No. 1 is augmented by a link with fear of the police. His having been saved from drowning at the age of five or his having only just managed to avoid being shot by the SS twice do not appear to have contributed to his fear of death, for both episodes comprised a negation of death. Only when he had become known to the general public had his phobia developed:

Ever since he had become a famous writer he had begun to fear for his life, with the result that he always walked on the kerbs of pavements, looking up at the buildings; if trams and cars did not drive along the streets he would have walked in the middle of the carriageway, for he had the impression that all the window-ledges were just waiting for him to come along so that they could take his life, so that they could enjoy ending a famous, beautiful writer's life... (P, p. 46).

This fear of death is counterbalanced by his love of nature, and of cats, the animals that renew his and Eliška's love after they have ceased kissing each other in passion. (One of these cats is shot by a policeman, who claims it is feral.) Analogously, his suicidal thoughts, especially when he is hung over, are counterbalanced by the inspiration for writing which hangovers bring. This forms a minor motif in *Svatby v domě*. I quote from one of the main character's monologues:

the most precious thing in being a drunkard [...] is the next day, the hangover, the pangs of conscience, the melancholy [...]; the strength of the hangover lies in the way it makes one want to start a new life... and then, when one's hung over, or at least when I'm hung over, thoughts occur to one which I'd be frightened of thinking when completely sober [...] thoughts that would startle me at any other time [...] real thoughts, the thoughts by which one moves forward, not much, but a little forward... When one is hung over and realizes whom one had insulted last evening and night, what one had done, when one begins to sweat with horror and shame at all the ghastly things one had let out about oneself, all the words one had flung in the faces of one's neighbours and guests, when, as a result, one does not want to live any more, has hung-over thoughts about suicide, suddenly a half-concealed sentence appears... How will this one turn out? You know, my writing is — I'm just becoming aware of this now — my writing is also a sort of self-defence against suicide. (*SVD*, pp. 91–92)

The narrator attributes the same notion to Hant'a of *Příliš hlučná samota* (Too loud a solitude), who tells 'Hrabal' that his good thoughts occur to him only when he is hung over, at about eleven o'clock in the morning (*SVD*, p. 113). Elsewhere 'Hrabal' declares with sarcastic moral pathos, after he has heard that one of his drinking parties has kept the whole block awake all night: 'If I had any principles, I should go and jump under a train or into the Vltava, but since I'm an entirely unprincipled man, what can I do? Just live...' (*SVD*, p. 68)

The narrator emphasises the potential for the grotesque that lies in death with the motif of the death-mask of Hrabal which was made by Boudník and then kept in the shed of the ramshackle block in which Hrabal lives in the slum district of Libeň: 'There, on a peg knocked into the shed's roof-beam, hung a death-mask, tied together with wire like an earthenware pot repaired by a tinker; I did not need any imagination to recognise that it was the lawyer's [Hrabal's] face, the death-mask of a man surrounded by tendrils of Virginia creeper' (*SVD*, p. 51; see also, for example, pp. 145 or 148). When, as a little boy, Hrabal nearly drowns, he is tended by the same doctor, Michálek, who had examined the corpse of Anežka Hrušová (the girl whose murder led to the Hilsner blood-libel case that helped make T. G. Masaryk famous); the little boy's perilous plight had been noticed by only one person, a wheel-chair-bound old lady, and thus the episode becomes an emblem of the life-affirmation proclaimed by those who are physically afflicted, like the paraplegics Pavlík and Lothar elsewhere in *Proluky*. The fact that the old lady had recently suffered a gall-bladder attack looks forward to Hrabal's own gall-bladder operation when he more or less completely convinced himself that he was about to die, and was terrified. Thus his salvation from death in childhood is emblematically associated with his survival of the operation. Though hardly grotesque, the chain of events that links Masaryk, Hrabal,

a Bohemian-German erstwhile body-builder (Lothar) and a hospital under Communism certainly makes for whimsical historical irony.

Only once in *Proluky* does Hrabal employ the grotesque for political effect, and in this case what appears grotesque is actually simply photographic realism. Here life and death are not involved, though the official acknowledgement of his existence, his civil life, is. Normalization leads to the attempt to eliminate Hrabal as a writer, to ‘liquidate’ him. Eliška goes to the Union of Writers to secure a necessary document (the first speaker here is a secretary):

Can you issue a certificate of employment for Bohumil Hrabal? And a man’s voice said from the inner office... Never, Bohumil Hrabal is among the writers in liquidation. I didn’t give up... So issue me with a certificate that he is in liquidation! And the young woman [the secretary] once more stopped smoking and called into the office... Can we issue the State Prize winner with a certificate that he is in liquidation? And an elderly man dressed in a Windsor-check suit came to the doorway and told me to go to the Liquidation Fund on the top floor of [the] *Práce* [publishing house] on Wenceslas Square and to ask there, said that there was an official there who mended watches in his spare time and otherwise issued certificates for writers in liquidation. [... Then, when the narrator finds the official] he continued tightening the tiny screw of a pocket-watch with his tiny screwdriver and, finally, said to me... Certainly not. To get a new identity card Bohumil really does need a certificate of employment... but nowadays, being a writer in liquidation is not an occupation... (*P*, p.119)

Eliška fares better at the identity-card office in Libeň, where a helpful clerk issues a card straightaway because Hrabal is a famous writer, though actually she has confused him with Vladimír Páral — a writer who was permitted to publish even in the early stages of Normalization.

The episodes where Hrabal exploits the grotesque fusion of death and life-affirmation to the full concern the end of World War II. I take only two examples, both narrated by the alcoholic Hant’a (Haň’a). The first concerns the Czechs’ revenge on the Germans (and the expulsion of the Germans forms a minor motif of the trilogy); this example constitutes part of a sarcastic divagation on revolutions altogether; the use of ‘happening’ in the 1960s sense for ‘revolution’ serves to heighten the grotesque:

After all, we experienced a happening like that in 1945! Revolution, revolution, yes, revolution as well, but mainly property and defenceless people, for when does an ordinary fellow here have the chance to take what he likes from German flats, take any cattle he likes from sheds? The warehouses of all German firms in Prague and Jihlava and Brno were without guardian angels, and beautiful field-hospital nurses, everything offered itself for use in the historic moment once the last German soldier had left — heaven help the vanquished! [...] there is nothing more beautiful for a fellow than when he becomes evil, when he can do evil in the name of great history... (*SVD*, p. 113)

The second example of Hrabal's most grotesque fusion of death and life-affirmation is a fairy-tale whose pregnant pathos shows him at his best. Here the grotesque serves as an instrument to sour a caricature. Whether one laughs or not will depend on how macabre one's sense of humour is. The brief tale may also be interpreted as a hyperbolic emblem of Czechoslovakia under Soviet occupation after 1968:

It was already a month after the end of the war; things looked jolly and the cherries were ripening, and some Red Army soldiers came to the village I was living in and suddenly got an urge for some cherries, and they pushed down the fence as they had become accustomed to doing in the war, broke down whole branches... and ate and laughed... and the owner came, a painter, and he brought along a step-ladder and explained to them how much work he had had to put into getting this cherry tree to produce fruit, he spoke to them in Russian and made a drawing in the soil of how a tree grows, and the soldiers stopped eating and said they were brutes if they could destroy such beautiful trees... but the teacher of drawing and painting tried to console them, saying that it could not be put right now, but that they could use this step-ladder and pick as many cherries as they liked, and that they could come again the next day... And before they left they promised that the painter would be richly rewarded... and then they did not come again, but a fortnight later one of them did come, and was laughing, and the painter was in his garden and the soldier gave him something wrapped in newspaper... and, laughing, he rode away on his horse. And when the painter unwrapped the newspaper in the sunlight, there were diamond ear-rings in it, attached to blood-covered ears, women's ears, a real treasure-hoard, for of these ears there were six... (*SVD*, p. 115).⁹

Notes

- 1 Bohumil Hrabal, *Proluky*, s.l., 1986 (henceforth referred to as *P* + page number); Bohumil Hrabal, *Svatby v domě*, Toronto, 1987 (henceforth referred to as *SVD* + page number); *Vita Nuova*, Toronto, 1987 (henceforth referred to as *VN* + page number). Hrabal wrote *SVD*, with the subtitle *Dívčí romance* (A romance for girls) in January and February, 1984, *VN*, with the subtitle *Kartinky* (Pictures) from November, 1984, to February, 1985, and *Proluky* from October to December, 1985. *Proluky* saw two *samizdat* editions in 1986 (in Edice petlice, then in Pražská imaginace) and once in 1987 (Edice petlice). See Václav Kadlec, 'Bázkový hrdina Bohumil Hrabal', Milan Jankovič and Josef Zúmr (eds): *Hrabaliana. Sborník prací k 75. narozeninám Bohumila Hrabala*, Prague, 1990 [previously in *samizdat*, 1989], pp. 32 and 34.
- 2 See Jerome Hamilton Buckley: *The Turning Key. Autobiography and the Subjective Impulse since 1800*. Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1984, p. 38.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 4 William Spengemann, quoted by Brian Finney: *The Inner I. British Literary Autobiography of the Twentieth Century*. London, 1985, p. 13.
- 5 Milan Jankovič: *Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala*. Prague, 1996, p. 11.
- 6 See *ibid.*, *passim*, but also earlier versions of the pertinent chapters in Milan Jankovič: *Nesamozřejmost smyslu*. Prague, 1991, pp. 193–217.

- 7 Buckley, *The Turning Key*, p. 51.
- 8 Unlike the extracts in most other papers, those quoted in this chapter are not provided with the footnoted text of the original on the grounds that the actual language used is not a significant factor.
- 9 The story in parts echoes the Judas *vita* in the *Golden Legend*.

Hrabal's *Listopadový uragán* in the Context of the 'November Revolution' as a Literary Theme*

Pavel Janáček

Daniela Hodrová's (b. 1946) novel *Théta* (Prague, 1992) contains, among other things, foreshadowings of the changes which came about in Czechoslovakia in November 1989. Eliška Beránková, the author's fictional double, is even beaten until the blood runs on Jungmann Square, a few steps from Národní třída (National Avenue), during 'Palach Week'.¹ However, this motif does not lead in to any scene from what has since been called the 'November Revolution', or 'November' for short.² In her essay 'Město vidím...' (I can see the city...),³ Hodrová explains why: the manuscript of *Théta* had apparently contained a scene from the November demonstrations but 'the words about the euphoria, about fusing with the exultant crowd on Wenceslas Square, where I had also stood on the Wednesday of that decisive week, caught me in a lie and had to be deleted from the manuscript'.⁴

November 1989 as a literary theme seems to be governed by two mutually antagonistic rules within Czech literature of the 1990s. The first rule enjoins caution or reserve, the utmost expression of which is the deletion, as above, of a passage that has already been written. The second rule declares that even if reserve about November ends in the deletion of part of a text, some trace of the theme must be left somewhere in the margin, say, in a commentary on the text. The theme of November 1989 is simultaneously suspect and unavoidable. It need not be passed over in silence, but it must be handled with extraordinary care.

Between November 1989 and April 1990 Bohumil Hrabal wrote seven of his *dopisy Dubence* (letters to April⁵), by which he may have transgressed the first rule, the rule of silence, while satisfying more than any other Czech writer the second, the rule that declares the theme unavoidable. The first letter was called 'Listopadový uragán' (November hurricane), which provides the focus of the present essay. 'Listopadový

uragán' was followed by 'Živoucí řetězy' (Living chains), 'Na doraz' (Until it stops), 'Osm a půl' (Eight and a half), 'Svět a kalhoty Samuela Becketta' (The world and the trousers of Samuel Beckett), 'Mešuge stunde' (*Meshuge stunde*) and 'Ponorné říčky' (Lost rivulets). Immediately after completion, the stories⁶ were published, either in small editions or newspapers, or disseminated in typewritten copies; they were finally collected (with the other texts of the series) in two volumes, *Listopadový uragán* (Prague, 1990) and *Ponorné říčky* (Prague, 1991).⁷

Bohumil Hrabal was the first, indeed the only, leading author (except for protest-song poets like Jiří Dědeček [b. 1953])⁸ to make an instant literary theme out of the collapse of the Communist regime, of which he became both narrator and commentator. Most instantaneous November writing was produced by anonymous or marginal authors; only later did the theme trickle through into texts written by major writers. Considered as a whole, the November theme covers a broad spectrum of 1990s Czech literature, from the naïve, semi-folk, popular or tendentious levels to accomplished works of art. A depiction of November, or an echo of the theme, is to be seen in:

- Zuzana Brabcová (b. 1959): *Zlodějina* (Thievery; Prague, 1995);
- Antonín Brousek (b. 1941): *Vteřinové smrti* (Deaths in seconds; Prague, 1994);
- Zdena Frýbová (b. 1934): *Mafie po listopadu* (The Maffia after November; Prague, 1992);
- Jiří Kamen (b. 1951): *Za všechno může kocour* (It's all the cat's fault; Prague, 1997);
- Ivan Klíma (b. 1931): *Čekání na tmu, čekání na světlo* (Waiting for the dark, waiting for the light; Prague, 1993);
- Martin Nezval (b. 1960): *Anna sekretářka* ⁹ (Secretary Anna; Prague, 1992);
- Jan Novák (b. 1953): *Samet a pára* (Velvet and steam; Toronto, 1992);
- Rio Preisner (b. 1925): *Visuté mosty* (Suspension bridges; Svitavy, 1996);
- Martin C. Putna (b. 1968): *Kniha Kraft* (The Kraft Book; Prague, 1996);
- Daniel Stroj (b. 1943): *Pohroužení* (Immersion; Prague, 1995), a 'play about the revolution';
- Karel Sýs (b. 1946): *Pět let v mrtvém domě* (Five years in the House of the Dead; Munich, 1994);
- Vlastimil Třešňák (b. 1950): *Klíč je pod rohožkou* (The key's under the mat; Prague, 1995);

- Ludvík Vaculík (b. 1926): *Jak se dělá chlapec* (How to make a little boy; Prague, 1993);
- Michal Viewegh (b. 1962): *Báječná léta pod psa* (Dog-awful wonderful years; Prague, 1992;¹⁰ (Viewegh's November play, *Růže pro Markétu aneb Večírky revolucionářů* [Roses for Margaret, or: Parties for revolutionaries], written in 1991, has yet to be staged or published in the Czech Republic);
- Zdeněk Zapletal (b. 1951): *Kobova garáž* (Koba's garage;¹¹ Kroměříž, 1992).

It is worth considering the place which Hrabal's 'letters to April' occupy within this context and which of their features are Hrabal's alone and which are part of the underlying pattern of the November theme.

I.

In 'Listopadový uragán', the first story of his November series, Hrabal depicts, among other things, the clash between the police and the student procession, the so-called Massacre on Národní (National) Avenue, using many motifs commonly found in contemporaneous naïve writings.¹² Place-names like National Theatre, National Avenue (as the base of the student demonstrators) and Spálená Street (the base of the hordes of policemen) became a part of the symbolic apparatus, as did the motifs of the demonstrators' eyes, white police helmets, candles and flowers, lamentation and turmoil in which time momentarily stands still, the image of the street covered by pieces of clothing and the pavement wet with the blood of the victims. Surprisingly, this passage in 'Listopadový uragán' does not contain the motif of hands (stretched out or bare), which are also fundamental to the Massacre topos.

Towards the end of 'Listopadový uragán' Hrabal quotes one of the real November slogans: 'Today the whole of Prague — tomorrow the whole country.'¹³ (The same slogan is found, as a refrain, in Hrabal's next November story, 'Živoucí řetězy'.) He also emphasises that he 'had read and heard so many'¹⁴ slogans like this. The impact both of the naïve, semi-anonymous revolutionary works, ditties, poems and songs which were typed out, copied and pasted up all round the centre of Prague, and of the slogans used in the demonstrations is apparent in many parts of Hrabal's November 'letters to April'. Sometimes Hrabal explicitly claims to have copied some part of his text from the walls of Prague houses, as in the case of the expression 'Velvet Revolution'.¹⁵

The occasional works which appeared in November and December 1989 depicted three main scenes, or clusters of motifs. First, the ‘Massacre on National Avenue’: the poems in question — for there was scarcely any prose — usually bore the title ‘November 17’ and in them the students’ ordeal of that day was accompanied by references to the death of Jan Opletal and Nazi repression against university students in 1939;¹⁶ secondly, the mass demonstrations of the first revolutionary week; and, finally, the December campaign in support of Václav Havel as presidential candidate.¹⁷ The first half of Bohumil Hrabal’s ‘letters to April’ (from ‘Listopadový uragán’ to ‘Osm a půl’) is dominated by the same themes.

It need not be assumed that all similarities between Hrabal’s works and the occasional works of November 1989 are the result of direct, one-way intertextual borrowing;¹⁸ any intertextuality in Hrabal’s November series may be safely assumed to have arisen from shared experience, not from linear borrowing. There was, after all, a variety of oral sources (rumour, radio or, later, television and textual sources (typewritten, or printed journalism and fiction) available to anyone, not to mention the broader literary tradition and the emotional environment of the ‘social atmosphere’. In any case, it is easy to envisage that Hrabal was merely reverting to his earlier practice, in which he saw himself in the role of a *zapisovatel* ‘recorder’, not *spisovatel* ‘writer’, his task being merely to edit what he heard people around him saying. The principle is explicitly recalled many times in his ‘letters to April’.

One of the occasional poems to be seen on the November posters ran:

What happened on Friday the 17th,
do you call that a student celebration?
There were masses of white helmets
raging like a herd of wild beasts.
The ground covered in blood and clothes,
God, dear God, where on earth am I?¹⁹

The penultimate line of the poem, with its reference to blood and clothing, that is, the ‘landscape’ after the battle, has many variations throughout the body of November writings: ‘...an uncustomary amount of unusual litter lies on the street as if a gale has ripped through this way’,²⁰ or, in a version which highlights one of the national symbols frequently employed in the naïve texts: ‘a torn and trampled tricolor under the arcade by Mikulandská Street’ catches the eye of a passing observer.²¹ I shall compare the lines quoted with their counterpart in Hrabal’s ‘Listopadový uragán’.

Hrabal’s narrator dwells more on the lost garments than on the blood-covered street. Something had been taken to excess and Hrabal, having

muted the actual act of beating and avoiding reference to 'wild police beasts', expresses the widely experienced shock by describing the scattered pieces of clothes left on the ground. The motif of female underwear, an extremely private item, contradicts the collective, public nature of the scene, while the final colourful chord underlines the total confusion:

... he saw, near the Reduta, scarves and caps lying there on the asphalt roadway and the pavements, he even saw some knickers there... and an elderly man came crying out of the arcade, holding a black shoe in one hand and a yellow one in the other...²²

The motif of the lost shoe is not unique among the November writings. One typewritten essay accompanied the same motif by a string of explanations of its symbolic content:

The square was unnaturally empty. Only police cars and white helmets. [...] And yet something else was left behind. A baby's bootie. It looked absurd on the giant square. A tiny bootie, lost in the haste that was caused by fear. It had stayed behind as a dumb witness. But I saw that it was shouting. Shouting at the white helmets all around that they would be back. All of them. The man who made it, the man who sold it, the man who bought it and the little one who had worn it. They would all come back. Tomorrow. Like an anonymous crowd that flows to and fro like the sea. Back. And forth. They would come back and remind themselves!²³

The motif of a blood-stained pavement was also treated slightly more temperately by Hrabal than by revolutionary writers. For example, the poem signed by 'Studenti z Pardubic' (Students from Pardubice) used the motif of blood, a key element in November hagiography, as the 'brackets' for the Massacre scene:

Blood from baton-blows trickles into eyes
the metal lion on the beret badge turns its head.
[...]
A punch to silence us, a shield against the flowers,
the cold paving of the square must once again drink blood.²⁴

Hrabal's depiction of the scene also culminates in the motif of blood, but in a slightly less emotional manner, without repeating it:

... and there on the pavement in front of those few shops they are setting little candles at places still stained with the warm blood of those who were beaten...²⁵

In the 'letters to April', the artistic 'condensing' of common Massacre motifs is accompanied by their typically Hrabalesque stylization. Hrabal depicted November in a mythical mode, putting it instantly in a sequence of great revolutions, after the French Revolution and the Russian October Revolution.²⁶ In his vision of a 'permanent [*permanentní*] velvet

revolution'²⁷ as the resurrection of the Czech nation, redeemed by the sacrifice of children and reborn through Pop Art happenings, Hrabal blended nationalist and religious terminology with the aesthetic utopia of the late avant-garde of his artistic youth: '... as Vladimír Boudník put it in his manifesto of "explosionalism", [it's] not that all of us will make art, but that everyone can be an artist...' ²⁸

In 'Listopadový uragán', congruent with the main corpus of the Velvet Revolution theme, Hrabal recalls the events that followed the death of Jan Opletal. The narrator's reminiscence of how he had himself attended Opletal's funeral, but had met some friend and instead of demonstrating had sat in a pub, reminds us of Hrabal's usual anti-heroic outsider, the observer of history.

The heraldic symbol of the Bohemian lion appears repeatedly in the instant November works.²⁹ Bohumil Hrabal subjected the Bohemian lion to his tendency to sanctify the profane spaces of popular culture (the pub is the obvious example) and to desecrate sacred places. In 'Svět a kalhoty Samuela Becketta' Hrabal has the Bohemian lion perform in a cabaret sketch before the eyes of members of Parliament. President Havel introduces the redesigned state emblems and '...a beautiful lady bore these state emblems in her outstretched arms one by one so that everyone could take his fill of wonder at this crowned revelation...' ³⁰

In a marginal note to the first book edition of 'Listopadový uragán' Hrabal even dares to write that the work constitutes 'one hundred and fifty thousand toasts to the Velvet Revolution, that November of crisis and simultaneously of victory'.³¹ Elsewhere he adds that 'we must love the Velvet Revolution to the extent that we would die for it'.³² With such utterances Hrabal is parodically paraphrasing such Communist verbal icons as *Vítězný únor* (Victorious February, that is, February 1948, when the Communists came to power), and the ideal of passionate self-identification with revolution. The intention of such allusions is probably to declare Hrabal's awareness of the embarrassing devotion of some Czech post-war literature to the theme of revolution and to the socialist state and its order based on propaganda.

Placing his November 'letters to April' within this tradition, Hrabal states that he is deliberately doing something that is generally acknowledged to be beneath a writer, that is, to belong to a totalitarian culture. We may take the whole last phase of Hrabal's work, starting from the 'letters to April', or, perhaps, from the autobiographical trilogy *Svatby v domě* (Weddings in the House), as a recapitulation and the author's self-reassurance about various aspects of his poetics and the various symbols of his literary world.³³ In this case, references to the doomed ideological

wording of the revolutionary theme may denote Hrabal's constant attempts to say what should not be said because it is considered of no value to art.

By condensing the November Massacre topos and giving it his personal stylization Hrabal charted it for the future; he drew it into the canon. Thus five years later Zuzana Brabcová could echo Hrabal's 'scream' of the yellow shoe in the opening scene of her novel *Zlodějina*:

We are crawling towards one another on all fours, the street is suddenly silent and empty, blood is dripping from the medical student's nose onto the torn banner. A neck-breakingly visual scream shines towards us from a shop window; only when I focus do I see an ordinary orange.³⁴

II.

Hrabal's 'Listopadový uragán' introduces an episode which implies that there is a direct relationship between his story and the body of texts that appeared on the occasion of the May 1945 Prague Uprising. The narrator returns by a 'seventeen', that is a number 17 tram, to the Law Faculty building merely to run his finger over the inscription on the memorial plaque which reads: 'In memory of an unknown fighter who lay down his life for freedom here in May 1945.'³⁵ May 1945, as a familiar thematic and stylistic element in post-war Czech literature, set the pattern for the instant November 1989 works that Bohumil Hrabal took up with such enthusiasm. Elements common to the literature of May 1945 and the instant literature of November 1989 include the emblems of state and Czech history, the Bohemian lion, Prague Castle, John Huss or the Hussites, Prague as an erotic object, and an author's endeavour to identify himself with the revolutionary masses.

The second way in which November 1989 became stylized appeared gradually after 1992 in the works of professional writers. These sought, however, to avoid the pattern of a writer-revolution relationship as established in May 1945 by such writers as František Halas (1901–49), Jaromír Hořec (b. 1921), František Hrubín (1910–71), Jiří Kolář (b. 1914), Vítězslav Nezval (1900–58), Jaroslav Seifert (1901–86), Fráňa Šrámek (1877–1952) or Vilém Závada (1905–82). Prose became the dominant genre in literature about November 1989 whereas most writing about May 1945 was in verse. In contrast to May 1945, which was frequently a mono-theme, November 1989 tends to be only one of the themes in a work, although it normally plays a distinctive role in the structure. Thus the whole action of Zuzana Brabcová's *Zlodějina* is initiated by a blow to the main male character, Eman Podoba's, head from a police truncheon on

November 17, and the entire network of lines of action in Jiří Kamen's novel *Za všechno může kocour* leads to the culmination in the Massacre.

The poetry of the May Uprising (its key emblem was an iron-strong barricade made up of thousands of small, anonymous granite setts) expressed the poet's will to merge with the fighting nation, with the masses, to subject the poet's personality to the revolutionary collective. In contrast, perhaps the strongest common feature of the literary stylization of the November theme is an emphasis on the writer's lack of interest in the revolution. Antonín Brousek's poem 'Prosté motivy' (Simple motifs) in the collection *Vteřinové smrti* observes the November events comparatively closely, with a journalistic interest in the sequence of events ('Now it is starting to collapse like a house of cards').³⁶ However, the alleged date and place of writing ('Berlin, November 1989') emphasise the distance between the writer and those events. More importantly, the writer may simply feel a need to inform the reader of his non-presence in the revolution: Mr Prag, the protagonist of Vlastimil Třešňák's novel *Klíč je pod rohožkou*, experiences shock at the 'Massacre on Národní', but somewhere in New York and in front of the television; in other words, via the medium which has even become *the* symbol of the passive acceptance of events.

It was unimaginable for the poet of May 1945 to take part in the revolution only by listening to the wireless set. For the writer of November 1989 it is typical that he should, allowing that wireless is replaced by television. Visiting the heart of the November events, the theatre (Činoherní klub) where *Občanské fórum* (Civic Forum) was founded, the narrator of Jan Novák's novel *Samet a pára* decides to watch the revolutionary assembly on television:

Somehow I couldn't immerse myself in the river of emotions streaming through the hall and so I went back to the foyer, and then I realized that I could easily watch the discussion from the bar, where Joska was holding a seat for me. For there was a black-and-white CC monitor hanging over the bar targeted at the stage so that actors and theatre staff could drink at their leisure during working hours, and accordingly I didn't have to worry that I'd miss anything happening in the hall, so I set about drinking gloriously chilled, lubricating Stolichnaya vodkas.³⁷

Authors like Antonín Brousek undoubtedly took a more sceptical view of the November revolution than Bohumil Hrabal.³⁸ Hrabal saw the reborn *lid* (the people) demonstrating on the Prague squares; on the same squares Brousek sees *národní králíkárnu* (a national rabbit-hutch), *hnojník* (a dunghill), *davy, které šílí* (madding crowds), those who *po léta trapně mlčeli* (had maintained an embarrassing silence for years).³⁹ But despite Hrabal's enthusiasm and excited exaggeration of hopes for the future

Czech, or Central European, ‘velvet’ Utopia (the later, wiser writer on the November theme cannot associate the revolution with any such hopes), he does foreshadow the disinterested approach of the later stylization of the theme. The narrator of ‘Listopadový uragán’ also watches the unfolding events of November 17 on television; he also inserts a mediator, another narrator between him and the Massacre on Národní. And Hrabal, like Brousek, also observes events from a distance — not from abroad, but from the village of Kersko.⁴⁰

The protagonist of Zdeněk Zapletal’s autobiographical novel *Kobova garáž* delivers speeches on the November demonstrations while trying hard, as narrator, to neutralize the risk of getting carried away by chopping the narration into short, bare sentences:

Hutera smiled. He was pouring out shorts. He took P. K. aside and asked him if he would like to become a member of the Civic Forum coordinating committee in Mlín. P. K. declined.⁴¹

Hrabal depicts a similar scene in ‘Listopadový uragán’: sitting in the pub he turns down the invitation of a young female student to attend some revolutionary discussion session. Instead of himself he gives her two of his ‘letters to April’.

III.

Bohumil Hrabal’s November ‘letters to April’ lie somewhere between the naïve stylization of the revolutionary theme and its later artistic stylization in formal literature. The November and December explosion of popular verbal art offered him an opportunity to apply his lifelong bias towards the *naïviste*, or popular, art which he had exhibited in most of his works. It also offered him the opportunity to become the voice of the people, to meet the crowds’ demands for a ‘Writer of the Revolution’ (disappointment at the silence of ‘high’, or ‘professional’, literature is expressed many times in the instant November texts⁴²). At the same time, the theme of revolution allowed Hrabal to attack the contemporary rules of ‘high’ literary stylization, that is, to place himself once again at the margin of Czech literature.

The motifs that Hrabal shared with the instant works by naïve authors were elevated by him according to the principles of his own poetics; the true purpose of his ‘letters to April’ is to recapitulate those principles. Thus he recorded the topos of the ‘Massacre on Národní’ and related November motifs in advance of the later slow return of Czech literature to the theme of the November revolution, of which such writers as Třešňák

or Brabcová duly availed themselves. He also merged the casual attitude to the revolution current in the 1990s with an exalted identification of himself with it; authorial self-identification of a similar type typified literary workings of the events of May 1945. Hrabal's 'Listopadový uragán' is where the Czech literature of (May) 1945 and that of (November) 1989 meet.

In this context it should be mentioned that Hrabal's memories of himself include poetry of May 1945. One of his early poems, 'Proutek se dotkl května' (A wand touched May), provides a typical example of May 1945 'literary barricades'. It ends with an apostrophe of God that engages man:

Now you're sorry
You didn't place a single cube of granite
on the barricades.⁴³

Notes

- * This essay arose in connection with the project for A History of Czech Literature since 1945, supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic (Grant no. 405/97/S017).
- 1 In fact, the scene is structured as a mirror-image version of the November Massacre *topos*, as will be apparent to any reader acquainted with the topography of central Prague; see *Théta*, pp. 142–43. 'Palach Week', observed in mid-January, commemorates the self-immolation and death of the student Jan Palach in January 1969, part of the sequel to the Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968.
- 2 I retain these expressions, with their popular connotations, throughout this chapter.
- 3 *Slovenské pohľady*, 1992, 5, pp. 65–98 (the source of quotations in this essay); 'Město vidím...' was also published in book form by Euroslavica (Prague, 1992).
- 4 '... slova o euforii, o splynutí s jásajícím davem na Václavském náměstí, kde jsem ve středu onoho rozhodujícího týdne také stála, mě tenkrát usvědčila ze lži, musela být z rukopisu *deleata*.' (*Ibid.* p. 71.)
- 5 The girl's Czech name *Dubenka* is derived from *duben* 'April', the month; it is not a normal Czech name.
- 6 I avoid treating Hrabal's 'letters to April' as a form of journalism, or 'literary journalism' — Hrabal's own term, which was preserved or discussed in many reviews and critical studies, such as Milan Jankovič's definitive *Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala* (Prague, 1996); Václav Kadlec's survey 'Bázlivý hrdina' in Milan Jankovič and Josef Zmr (eds): *Hrabaliana* (Prague, 1990); and Radko Pytlík's ... *a neuvěřitelné se stalo skutkem* ([Prague], 1997). Instead I prefer the term 'story', since it underlines the fictional aspects of the texts. For Hrabal's pseudo-journalistic transformation of reality in the 'letters to April' see Susanne Roth: 'Dichtung oder Wahrheit? (Dodatky Dubence)', *Hantá Press*, 1990, no. 8, pp. 27–37 and 1991, no. 9, pp. 18–23.

- 7 The source of all quotations from the 'letters to April' is, however, Karel Dostál and Václav Kadlec (eds): *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, vol. 13 — *Dopisy Dubence*, Prague, 1995 (hereafter *SSBH* 13). All quotations from works which were in immediate response to the November events come from a private collection of several hundred such texts, a small portion of which was published in the slim popular volume *Sametová čítanka* (A Velvet Reader), Prague, 1990.
- 8 Two of Dědeček's songs for the November rallies were published in the collection *Reprezentant lůzy* (A representative of the mob), 2nd ed., Prague, 1994.
- 9 One of the few titles with a punning allusion to an earlier age, being modelled on Ivan Olbracht's (1882–1952) *Anna proletárka* (Anna the proletarian, 1928).
- 10 The film based on this novel is known under the 'American' title: *The wonderful years that sucked*.
- 11 The title refers to a vacant lot nicknamed after 'Koba', the *nom de guerre* of Stalin.
- 12 See *SSBH* 13, pp. 130–31.
- 13 'Dneska celá Praha — zítra celá země.' (*Ibid.*, p. 138.)
- 14 '...četl a slyšel tolik...' (*ibid.*).
- 15 'Sametová revoluce' (*ibid.*, p. 140).
- 16 Jan Opletal (1915–39), a medical student, was fatally injured on 28 October 1939 during a demonstration against the German occupation of rump Bohemia and Moravia. His funeral on 15 November 1939 burgeoned into a fully-fledged anti-Nazi demonstration and was the direct pretext for the German authorities to close down the Czech universities on 17 November and launch their persecution of Czech students. Hence the declaration of that date as International Students' Day, and hence too its celebration, with 'revolutionary' consequences, in 1989.
- 17 At the beginning of 'Osm a půl' (*SSBH* 13, pp. 181–82), Hrabal's narrator looks on at what is going on: young women are decorating posters of the new Czech president Václav Havel with small lipstick hearts. Havel was regularly treated as an erotic idol in the occasional works arising out of November, for example (from the private collection referred to in Note 7):

Záruka nejbližších změn –
Václav Havel, idol žen.

*The guarantee of imminent change –
Václav Havel, idol of women.*

or:

Ať se na mě nemračí
Aleš, Karel, Pavel,
Václava mám nejradší,
protože je Havel.

*Let them all not scowl at me –
Aleš, Karel and Pavel
Václav's the one I love the best
because he is a Havel.*

or:

Jiřina, Jarka, Jana, Pavla
srdečně zdraví Václava Havla.

*Jiřina, Jarka, Jana and Pavla
salute Václav Havel from the heart.*

or:

Všechny české i slovenské holky *All Czech and Slovak girls are glad*
jsou rády,
že Vašek Havel je tady, *that Vašek Havel is here,*

že bude dál vnímat slunce, vůni *that he will still take in the sun, the*
 kvítí *scent of flowers*
 a stále psát tak, jak to cítil a *and carry on writing as he felt and*
 cítí!!!! *feels it!!!*

- 18 There is some evidence for the reception of Hrabal's 'Listopadový uragán' among the contributors to the instant literature arising out of November.
- 19 'Co stalo se 17. v pátek, / to měl být studentů svátek?! / To byla spousta bílých helem, / zuřících jak stádo šelem. / Krve a svršků plná zem, / Bože ach Bože, kde to jsem?!' (Source see Note 7.)
- 20 '... na ulici se válí nezvyklé množství neobvyklého smetí, jako by se zde přehnala vichřice' (Jiří Sirotek: *Praha povstala* (17. 11. - 21. 11. 1989)).
- 21 '... roztržená a zdupaná trikolora v podloubí u Mikulandské ulice', Jan Rybář, in the introduction to a report on the Massacre (written on November 18).
- 22 '... tak viděl, jak u Reduty, jak tam na asfaltové dlažbě a chodnících leží šály a čepice, dokonce tam viděl i dámské kalhotky... a z podloubí vyšel starší plačící pán a v jedné ruce držel černou botu a ve druhé botu žlutou...' (SSBH 13, p. 131).
- 23 'Náměstí bylo nepřirozeně prázdné. Jenom policejní vozy a bílé přilby. [...] A ještě něco tu zbylo. Dětská botička. Působila absurdně na tom obrovském náměstí. Malá dětská botička, ztracená v chvatu, který vyvolal strach. Zůstala jako němý svědek. Ale já viděl, že křičela. Křičela na ty bílé přilby kolem, že se zas vrátí. Všichni. Ten, co ji vyrobil, ten, co ji prodal, ten, co ji koupil a ten malý, co ji nosil. Ti všichni se vrátí. Už zítra. Jako anonymní dav, který se přelévá jako moře. Sem. Tam. Vrátí se a připomenou si!' (Pavel Sadílek: 'Vždyť je to jen obyčejný dav!!!' [But it's just an ordinary crowd!!!]). This report is not actually on the November Massacre, but describes the previous demonstration on Wenceslas Square on October 28. It was sent to join the collection of November texts (see Note 7) in December 1989.
- 24 'Krev z rány od pendreku stéká do očí / lev z kovu na baretu hlavu otočí. / [...] / K umlčení rána pestí, proti kvetům štít, / chladná dlažba na náměstí krev musí zas pít.' (Students from Pardubice: To the students of Prague.)
- 25 '... a tam na dláždění chodníku pod těmi několika kvelby pokládají svícicky na ta místa ještě zbrocená teplou krví těch, kteří byli zbiti...' (SSBH 13, p. 131).
- 26 For example, in 'Listopadový uragán', in connection with the ongoing Prague events, the narrator alludes to the journalist John Reed, author of a propaganda chronicle of the Russian October Revolution. And a woman student and member of the strike committee who invites him to join the revolutionaries is nicknamed 'Marseillaisa'. See *ibid.*, pp. 132, 136.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 212.
- 28 '... jako to v manifestu explosionalismu měl Vladimír Boudník, ne že umění budou dělat všichni, ale že umělcem může být každý...' (*ibid.*, p. 151.)
- 29 See, for example, the Pardubice students' poem quoted above.
- 30 '... krásná dáma ve zdvižených pažích pomalu nesla jeden ten státní znak za druhým, aby všichni se dosyta vynadivili tomu korunovanému zjevení...' (SSBH 13, p. 194.) In other words, the Communist star over the Bohemian lion's head had been replaced by the crown which it had borne historically.
- 31 '... sto padesát tisíc přípitků na počest sametové revoluce, na ten krizovný a současně vítězný měsíc Listopad' (*ibid.*).

- 32 '... my musíme milovat tu sametovou revoluci tak, že jsme schopni i pro ni umřít' (*ibid.*, p. 211).
- 33 Václav Kadlec (see his study cited in footnote 6) divides Hrabal's work into five segments according to the proportion of experiment in each period; the last period began, according to Kadlec, after *Příliš hlučná samota* (1976) and he calls it 'memories of experimenting'. Kadlec does not claim that Hrabal's 'memories of experimenting' are of less artistic value than his more experimental works themselves. Similarly, my assertion of Hrabal's 'self-recapitulation' in the 'letters to April' is not to deny Jankovič's conclusions on the particular novelty in the poetics of Hrabal's last works, especially the importance of the narrator's gradual identification with the author. See Jankovič, *Kapitoly z poetiky Bohumila Hrabala*, Prague, 1996. (Jankovič says that, in the 'letters to April', 'the supports of composed fictional wholes continue to dissolve', p. 152.)
- 34 'Lezeme k sobě po čtyřech, ulice je náhle tichá a liduprázdná, medikovi kape z nosu krev do potrhaného transparentu. Z výlohy nám září vstříc jakýsi krkolomně vizuální výkřik; teprve když zaostřím, spatřím obyčejný pomeranč.' (Zuzana Brabcová: *Zlodějina*, Prague 1995, p. 7.)
- 35 'Na památku neznámého bojovníka, který tady padl za svobodu v květnu 1945.' (*SSBH* 13, p. 138.)
- 36 'Už se to řítí jako domek z karet.' (Antonín Brousek: *Vteřinové smrti*, Prague, 1994, p. 84.)
- 37 '... já jsem se nějak nemohl ponořit do té řeky citu proudící sálem, a tak jsem se vrátil zpátky do foyeru a tam jsem zjistil, že se můžu na besedu dívat přímo od baru, kde mi Joska držel místo. Nad barpultem totiž visel černobílý monitor a snímal jeviště, aby herci a zaměstnanci divadla mohli v klidu v pracovní době pít, a já už tím pádem nemusel mít pocit, že o něco v sále přijdu, a tak jsem se dal do pití nádherně vychlazených, olejnatých voďourů značky Stoličnaja.' (Jan Novák: *Samet a pára*, Toronto, 1992, p. 72.)
- 38 Janáček omits from the list of works quoted earlier as alluding to the November events Jiří Kratochvíl's *Avion* (1993), which describes another type of sceptical alienation from the experience of liberation, namely that of the child of an émigré. (Ed., with thanks to Rajendra Chitnis for drawing his attention to this.)
- 39 See Note 35.
- 40 A cottage at Kersko, actually Kerské Woods, near Lysá nad Labem and about 15 miles NE of Prague, was Hrabal's second home for much of his professional life; for long periods he spent more time there than at his Libeň flat.
- 41 'Hutera se usmíval. Nalíval panáky. Odvedl si P. K. stranou a zeptal se ho, jestli by se nechtěl stát členem koordinačního výboru OF v Mlíně. P. K. nechtěl.' (Zdeněk Zapletal: *Kobova garáž*, Kroměříž, 1992, p. 221.)
- 42 See, for example, the ending of Jan Votroubek's poem 'Tzv. pár veršů' (A few lines of verse, so to say):

Plexiskla rachotí
a kostky se barví
do červena.
Odsuzuji je
a na protest

*Plexiglass rattles
and paving stones
run red.
I condemn them
and in protest*

svůj širák odhazuji v dáli,	<i>hurl my hat into the distance,</i>
necht' nese mé poselství	<i>let it carry my message</i>
po celé zemi všem lidem.	<i>throughout the land to all people.</i>
Házím rukavice básníkům	<i>I throw down my gauntlet to those poets</i>
renomovaných jmen,	<i>of renowned names</i>
kterí drží zobák...	<i>who keep their lips buttoned...</i>

- 43 'Teď ti je líto / Ani kostičku žuly jsi nepostavil / na barikády.' In Miroslav Červenka (ed.): *Sebrané spisy Bohumila Hrabala*, vol. 1: *Básnění*. Prague 1992, p. 157.

Appendix 1

The untitled ‘introduction’ or ‘foreword’ to *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel**

Translated by David Short

This short text is translated here as a partial introduction to Hrabal’s method in Hrabal’s own words. However many more of Hrabal’s works may continue to appear in English, this particular type of text is unlikely to be among them; the book in which it appeared itself practically defies translation, since it otherwise consists of photographs, some of which are included in Chapter 5 herein, thus this text might otherwise never come before the increasingly appreciative English-speaking readership. While the focus here is on the work to which it specifically attaches, *toto město je ve společné péči obyvatel*, much of what Hrabal says applies *mutatis mutandis* to all his work, almost irrespective of sub-genre. There is the opposition between the detail and the grand picture: one street, Prague, Europe and the World; the accidental quality of what men say and do, from the tawdry to the sublime, the prosaic to the poetic, which it is for the acute observer to record or replicate; there is a partial account of those whom Hrabal saw as his mentors or models; and, important for this volume, there is the presentation of the ideas as if projected through the unjaundiced eye of the foreign visitor, actually the visitor to Prague, but perhaps suggesting no less the foreign ‘visitor’ to Hrabal’s own work — in whichever of its manifestations of ‘montage, collage and assemblage’ it might appear.

Perhaps with some lack of modesty, Hrabal himself comes out of it as a master-builder in his own right, constructing his work out of the bricks of all the ‘wondrous encounters’ he sees and hears around him, and holding them together with the mortar of his own peculiar imagination.

* The translation that follows was originally prepared for a reading at the Czech Centre, London.

The foreigner who arrives in this city, which is in the joint care of its inhabitants, may stroll not only from Romanesque styles through the Baroque to the Second Empire, but may, on its very streets, gain a clear insight into all the stages of modern art. On the main street he will understand why Rimbaud was excited by poetic junk and lumber, here it will dawn on him as something real why Lautréamont thought up a parable for beauty — that beauty is like the wondrous encounter between a sewing-machine and an umbrella on an operating table. Here, on our streets, the foreigner will appreciate why Marcel Duchamps, at the Paris Exposition, placed a stand on some bottles and right next to it a bicycle wheel and then signed it as his own work; on one of our squares the foreigner will realise why that selfsame artist Duchamps sent a chamber pot found by chance to the New York exhibition as his own artefact. With a smidgin of malice, such a foreigner may, on the busiest street-corner, give a lecture on “painting from rubbish”, that poetry manufactured in the hat of Kurt Schwitters, those famous pictures composed of objects gathered at random from the city’s roads; as dusk falls, the foreigner may stutter out the incomplete neon advertising slogans and company names and consign such distortions to the entropy of text of Max Benze and the schools of information theory. And if such a foreigner is also knowledgeable about pop-art, he may easily see Robert Rauschenberg riding through the streets of Prague on roller-skates past piles of junk and scrap metal and lumber, just like at home in his New York flat. And so, too, each and every native, who is, however, a stranger at home, may make in this city the ironical discovery that one may walk through these streets and be dazzled by the beautiful notion that all the isms have made an assignation here and that all those montages, collages and assemblages which have arrived on the street through untidiness and negligence and neglect may be considered an objective coincidence capable of calling forth a simultaneous poem.

However, leaving wit and irony to one side, we can immerse ourselves in the normal life of this city’s people, men, women and children, who return via these streets and squares from work and school. And then we begin to discover that the beauty of decay is in direct opposition to the conservation of the architectural and artistic beauty which the brains of royal master-builders and the little hands of working men have imprinted on this metropolis. What is more, we begin to see that this city belongs not just to its inhabitants, but to all the people of the world who arrive here each year in their millions to delight in the hundred-spined beauty which, for a thousand years, has alighted on this huge ping-pong table in the form of inspirational ping-pong balls flying in from all points of the European compass to metamorphose on landing into cathedrals and churches and

palaces and houses, thoughts and ideas and ways of life, but always slightly deformed by the domestic environment, which, sometimes, has sent those style-balls flying back with such intensity that it has become possible to refer to the specific style of this city lying at the heart of Europe and so in the joint care of the entire world.

The textual montage attempts to express the polyhedral quality of this stylistic discordance through the horizontal flow of living speech, registering in snatches the roar of streets and of noisy secluded spots, the rear-view mirror of ancient legends, Czech humour in the statements recorded in documents from magistrates' courts, the oriental mystery of the fate of chessmen, which are yet those of men, and the statuarial poetry of the verticals of saints and their attributes that adorn the city. Through the arhythmical alternation of these five motifs, discordant sentences establish necessary friendships with one another, just like all the things and all the people gathered up and bundled together in this huge sheet that is the City.

This book may then be considered a satirical, distorting and enlarging mirror of Prague irony and black humour, which crudely and deliberately states what has been hinted before. But this book may also be considered a once sought-out document of the extent to which master-builders and the hands of workmen have succeeded in renewing the charm of the city in its primal beauty.

Appendix 2

A Select Bibliography of Works by Bohumil Hrabal published in English

The entries in this list are ordered alphabetically by their *Czech* title.

Automat svět as:

The Death of Mr. Baltisberger. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1973; (with an introduction by Daniel S. Miritz [= Josef Škvorecký) London: Abacus, 1990. The English selection is not quite a complete version of the Czech selection of stories published as *Automat svět*. It contains: 'Romance' (*Romance*), 'Palaverers' (*Pábitelé*), 'Angel Eyes' (*Andělské voči*), 'A Dull Afternoon' (*Fádní odpoledne*), 'Evening Course' (*Večerní kurs*), 'The funeral' (*Pohřeb*), 'The Notary' (*Pan notář*), 'At the Sign of the Greentree' (*U zeleného stromu*), 'Diamond Eye' (*Diamantové očko*), 'A Prague Nativity' (*Pražské jesličky*), 'Little Eman' (*Emánek*), 'The Death of Mr Baltisberger' (*Smrt pana Baltisbergra*), 'The World Cafeteria' (*Automat svět*) and 'Want to see Golden Prague?' (*Chcete vidět Zlatou Prahu?*).

Městečko, kde se zastavil čas as:

The Little Town Where Time Stood Still. Translated by James Naughton and published jointly with *Cutting it Short* (*Postřižiny*, v.i.), Introduction by Josef Škvorecký. London: Abacus, 1993, 1994; New York: Pantheon, 1993.

Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále as:

I served the King of England. Translated by Paul Wilson. London: Chatto & Windus, 1989; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989; Vintage Books, 1990; London: Pan Books (Picador), 1990.

Ostře sledované vlaky as:

A Close Watch on the Trains. Translated by Edith Pargeter. London: Jonathan Cape, 1968; also as *Closely Watched Trains*, New York:

Grove Press, 1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981; Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1990, 1995 (with a 'Foreword' by Josef Škvorecký); New York: Penguin Books, 1991; and as *Closely Observed Trains*, London: Abacus, 1990.

Closely Observed Trains. A Film by Jiří Menzel and Bohumil Hrabal (i.e. the script of the eponymous film). Translated by Josef Holzbecher. London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1971; and as *Closely Watched Trains...*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971.

Postřižiny as:

Cutting it Short. Translated by James Naughton and published jointly with *The Little Town Where Time Stood Still* (details above).

Příliš hlučná samota as:

Too Loud a Solitude. Translated by Michael Heim in *Cross-Currents: A Yearbook of Central European Culture* (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan), Vol. 5, 1986, pp. 279-332; in book form: London: Deutsch, 1991, Abacus, 1993, and San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, 1992.

Taneční hodiny pro starší a pokročilé as:

Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. New York, San Diego, London: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995; London: Harvill, 1998.

Dopisy Dubence as:

Total Fears. Letters to Dubenka. Translated by James Naughton. Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 1998. This selection from the 'letters' contains 'Magic Flute' (Kouzelná flétna), 'Public Suicide' (Veřejná sebevražda), 'A Few Sentences' (Pár vět), 'The White Horse' (Bílý kůň), 'November Hurricane' (Listopadový uragán), 'Meshuge Stunde' (Mešuge stunde), 'A Pity We Didn't Burn to Death Instead' (Že jsme radši nevyhořeli), 'Total Fears' (Totální strachy) and 'The Rosenkavalier' (Růžový kavalír).

At the time of writing, a translated and annotated edition of *Klíčky na kapesníku* (provisionally as *Pirouettes on a Postage-Stamp or Spinning on a Sixpence*) is in preparation, translated by David Short.

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